

Socialism, Christianity, and Rosa Luxemburg

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Rosa Luxemburg

“A curious piece of historical sophistry” — that is how J.P. Nettl in his classic biography (Nettl 1966 vol 1: 323; 1969: 221) describes Rosa Luxemburg’s treatise, *Socialism and the Churches* (2004 [1905]). A rather convenient dismissal, is it not? It does allow Nettl to sidestep the whole issue of religion in Luxemburg’s work and get on with what he regards as the more important issues in her life and thought. By contrast, I want to give this neglected text a little more justice than Nettl does. This essay, then, is a sustained engagement with that work by Luxemburg, along with her essay, “An Anti-Clerical Policy of Socialism” (Luxemburg 2004 [1903]).

Despite all the beguiling simplicity of her style, the fascination that still surrounds her, or even the freshness of her work that makes it seem as though it were for today’s struggles, the reception of Rosa Luxemburg is bedeviled by two problems. Firstly, the vast majority of work on Luxemburg has focused on her biography; I was able to find at least eight biographies in the last four decades (Frölich 1969; Nettl 1966, 1969; Florence 1975: 79-158; Ettinger 1986; Jacob 2000; Abraham 1989; Shepardson 1996; Cliff 1980). That she was a woman is one obvious reason for focusing on her biography, especially the intimate and personal details. Another reason is that biography seems to be the fate of those on the Left who meet a grisly end or are visited by some scandal. For Luxemburg it was a sordid murder at the

hands of Social Democrat *Freikorps* on 15 January 1919 after a revolutionary wave. For Gramsci it was his incarceration by Mussolini and subsequent death from dreadful prison conditions, for Althusser the murder of H el ene, for Benjamin his fateful and bumbling suicide at the Spanish-French border, and so on. Mainly due to my deep suspicions concerning biography and the personality cult that it feeds (Boer 2007a: 433-4), I will avoid the temptations of biography as an all-encompassing explanatory framework for Luxemburg. The other engagement with Luxemburg is to republish her letters and essays in select collections (Looker 1972; Howard 1971; Waters 1994; Hudis and Anderson 2004; LeBlanc 1999; Ettinger 1979). As for critical engagement, that remains another story, still woefully intermittent and rarely, if ever, going outside her major work, *Accumulation of Capital* (Luxemburg 2003 [1913]).

So I will leave Luxemburg's biography on one side, preferring to engage critically with her writings on religion, or rather, Christianity and the Church. I am most interested in her evocation of what I call the political myth of an early Christian communism, as well as her arresting argument for freedom of conscience regarding religion in the socialist movement. On the way to those two points, I wish to explore and critique the following: her call for a politics of alliance between the Socialist and the Catholic workers; her Reformer's zeal, especially in terms of her scathing criticisms of the venality of the Catholic Church, the argument that the Church has betrayed the communist spirit of early Christianity, and her historical narrative that seeks to show how the Church became part of the ruling class; her enthusiastic valorization of Christian communism, pointing out that socialism is closer to early Christianity than the Church, that socialism will complete what was begun then, and that what was a limited communism of consumption must be transformed and completed by a communism of production; and finally, her startling argument that socialism is not opposed to religious belief and practice, since they are matters of freedom of conscience.

Tactics

A deeply running motive of Luxemburg's works on Christianity is to win the allegiance of the religiously faithful workers, especially the wave of new members that flooded her Polish party, Social Democracy of the Kingdom of Poland and Lithuania, in the revolutionary upsurge of 1904-5. With the diatribes of the Church against socialism in one ear and the socialist broadsides against economic and social

exploitation in the other ear, these workers found themselves split, torn between faithful obedience to the Church and a gut feeling that capital really was squeezing them “down to the last drop of blood” (Luxemburg 2004 [1905]: 2). What Luxemburg wants is a common front of all workers, Catholic, socialist or whatever: “The Social-Democrats have placed themselves the objective of drawing together and organizing the workers in the struggle against capital” (Luxemburg 2004 [1905]: 2). And the drive of that front is to challenge and overthrow the various forms that the exploiting and ruling classes might take.

Her unwavering targets are the owners of capital. These owners may be the bourgeoisie, or the remnants of the landed aristocracy, or the Church. The situation was, of course, deliciously complex and it is important not to confuse political power with economic control. Thus, if at the turn of the nineteenth century the bourgeoisie were the dominant owners of capital, if they had the upper hand in economic power, they were engaged in a life-and-death struggle with the aristocracy and the Church over political power. In that tussle over control of the state, those older feudal orders might strike a blow at the bourgeoisie, only to find that they were on the back foot not long afterwards. Add to this the fact that the Church and the aristocracy had also transformed themselves into owners of capital and the situation become even more complex.

As Marx showed so well in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, in these struggles all manner of tactical allegiances were made. Thus, the bourgeoisie might enlist sections of the working class, with a raft of promises, in order to overthrow the *ancien regime*, only to find that the working class itself had its own programme that was not in line with that of the bourgeoisie. The revolutions of 1848 constitute the moment when the working class, denied what was promised it, turned on the bourgeoisie, which was then forced to crush its former allies. Or, the Church, in its continual efforts to win back lost ground, in education, the care of the sick and the poor, and in pure temporal power, might make alliances with the bourgeoisie or the aristocracy to further its own agenda. And so on it goes, with all the different groups seeking to further their own positions in whatever way possible.

Into this situation come the socialists. For Luxemburg, their main drive leads to some surprising and apparently contradictory positions. At one moment she will attack the Church in a good old dose of anti-clericalism, advocating the total abolition

of ecclesiastical privilege, the complete separation of Church and state, the removal of all educational and welfare institutions and so on. She attacks the venality, exploitation and corruption of the clergy as any good Reformer might — but only when the purpose is to wrest economic and political power from the Church. As she puts it: “we will assail all efforts attempted by the Church to become a dominating power in the State” (Luxemburg 2004 [1903]: 1).

At other times, she takes a completely different tack and seeks to enlist the clergy and the faithful in the struggle against the depredations of the bourgeoisie. Indeed, she goes so far as to argue that the clergy should in fact be on the side of the socialists. She points out that socialists are not against the clergy who have been fulminating against them, but rather against exploitation at the hands of capital and state: “never do the Social-Democrats drive the workers to fight against clergy, or try to interfere with religious beliefs; not at all!” (Luxemburg 2004 [1905]: 2). Even more, she argues, if the Church was true to its roots, especially in the New Testament and early Christianity, then it could not help but support the socialists. As she writes, “Therefore it would seem as if the clergy ought to lend their help to the Social-Democrats who are trying to enlighten the toiling people. If we understand properly the teachings which the socialists bring to the working class, the hatred of the clergy towards them becomes still less understandable” (Luxemburg 2004 [1905]: 2).

Yet, her real wish in these efforts to bring the clergy on side (which she realistically knew would never work, except perhaps with the odd clergymen who were as rare as “white blackbirds” (Luxemburg 2004 [1905]: 4) are really directed at the workers faithful to the Church. On this matter, she wants to show that if the Church were true to itself, it would support the workers in their dissatisfaction with and struggles against exploitation. Even if the Church is not on their side in economic matters, it should be.

These are the twists in her arguments concerning Christianity and the Church that interest me in this chapter. On the one hand, there are stirring denunciations of the Church that should warm anyone’s heart with at least some social conscience, and yet on the other hand she is remarkably open to the value of religion within socialism. So much so that she will come out in favor of freedom of conscience regarding belief and even stresses the revolutionary and communist roots of Christianity itself. In what follows, I discuss and critique her diatribes against the Church first, before

moving on to do the same with her far more sympathetic treatment of the Church and its history.

A Reformer's Zeal

When reading Luxemburg's criticisms of the Church, I can't help being reminded of the zeal of the Protestant Reformers, especially those among the Radical Reformation like Thomas Müntzer. For them, the Church was corrupt to the core, run by self-serving and lascivious priests whose only desire was earthly gain and pleasure. The sheer wealth of the Church, the temporal power of the pope, the demand for indulgences in order to finance vast building projects — all these and more were signs for the Reformers that the Church had lost its higher, spiritual vocation.

Often Luxemburg writes in a similar vein, saturating her texts with a heavy moral tone. In a loud echo of the Reformers' criticism of indulgences, she condemns the clergy for being more interested in their fee than in the needs of the faithful:

Again, everyone knows how the priests themselves make profit from the worker, extract money out of him on the occasion of marriage, baptism or burial. How often has it happened that the priest, called to the bedside of a sick man to administer the last sacraments, refused to go there before he had been paid his "fee"? The worker goes away in despair, to sell or pawn his last possession, so as to be able to give religious consolation to his kindred (Luxemburg 2004 [1905]: 3-4).

Apart from this overweening concern with their own pockets, the priests more often than not side with the rich and powerful: "The majority of priests, with beaming faces, bow and scrape to the rich and powerful, silently pardoning them for every depravity, every iniquity" (Luxemburg 2004 [1905]: 4). One would be forgiven for thinking that these rich and powerful — a standard phrase is ever there was one — are somehow external to the Church. Reading Luxemburg, one gets the impression that the churches are full of poor workers. Or, to give her a little more credit, the workers are the only genuine believers. The catch is that the Church was very much one of the rich and powerful, of the owners of capital and the key figures of the state. To be perfectly vulgar (in a good Marxist sense), the Church needed to ensure that it did not bite the hand that fed it. Favourable treatment (she writes especially of Poland, her

home country), state funds for the churches, the maintenance of Church property — all these came from the state, from that same rich and powerful to whom Luxemburg was so strongly opposed. When it came to the crunch, the Church would first ensure this support base.

It should come as no surprise, then, that the Church should view the socialists' attacks on capital and the state as attacks on the Church itself, or at least on its current livelihood. No wonder the clergy call fire and brimstone down on the socialists: "It is with extraordinary vigour that the clergy fight against the socialists and try by all means to belittle them in the eyes of the workers . . . the priests fulminate against the workers who are on strike, and against the opponents of the government; further, they exhort them to bear poverty and oppression with humility and patience. . . . The clergy storm against the Social Democrats, exhort the workers not to 'revolt' against the overlords, but to submit obediently to the oppression of this government . . ." (Luxemburg 2004 [1905]: 1-3).

She is not afraid of a biblical reference or two to back up her argument, such as the following: "The bishops and the priests are not the propagators of Christian teaching, but the worshippers of the Golden Calf and of the Knout which whips the poor and defenceless" (Luxemburg 2004 [1905]: 3). Her reference is to the incident of the Golden Calf in Exodus 32. In this mythical story, Aaron, the patriarch of the priesthood, responds to the request of the people to make gods for them, since Moses had been gone for an eternity, chatting with God up on Mount Sinai about the interior design of the Tabernacle, a sort of chapel on camelback. So Aaron calls on them all to give him their gold and he shapes a "molten calf" — a young bull — with an engraving tool (in explicit contrast to the ban on making graven images in the second commandment (Exodus 20:4) that Moses is about to bring down the mountain with him). As the people dance and sing and celebrate, Moses returns and in anger smashes the tablets of the law and only just manages to hold God back from destroying the people completely. The story is of course wonderfully ambiguous (see Boer 2003: 42-64) — is Moses really the upholder of the true faith, and of law and order, and is this a rebellion that has been cast as "sin"? — but Luxemburg takes it at face value as the condemnation of wayward and corrupt religious practices.

It is but a passing reference, and she will have much more to say about biblical texts from Acts in the New Testament, but what strikes me is the exegetical move she

makes. Like the Reformers, the wayward practices of the Church are analogous to those of corrupt and self-serving priests in the Hebrew Bible. Figures such as Moses (and especially Jesus for the Reformers) are reconstructed as the embodiment of true religion over against such priests — precisely the role in which the Reformers saw themselves. Luxemburg's point, then, is very similar: the clergy behave like those wayward priests of ancient Israel. Even more, when we come to her discussions of the communist origins of Christianity, the socialists, who carry on such a tradition (even unknown to themselves), are analogous to the Reformers who sought to return to the *fons et origo* of the early Church.

What, then, is the proper task of the clergy? Here Luxemburg comes close to a theme we hear *ad nauseam* today: it is to provide religious consolation, to comfort the people who are “full of cares and wearied by their hard lives” (Luxemburg 2004 [1905]: 1). Instead of providing such consolation, the priests attack socialism in violent political speeches, turning the “the church and the pulpit into a place of political propaganda” (Luxemburg 2004 [1905]: 2). I can see Luxemburg's point, but it differs little from comments uttered on a regular basis today. If the churches should criticize one government policy or another, the standard response by those criticized is to say that the churches should not meddle in politics; rather, they should focus on the spiritual nourishment of souls. Only the political sides have changed, for it is more often than not conservative politicians who are apt to respond in such a way when the churches condemn a reactionary social policy or political decision. Assuming that the churches by and large agree with them, these politicians react by telling the churches they have stepped out of line when they criticize and take an alternative position. I am, in other words, not particularly persuaded by Luxemburg's point. For it is not so much a call for the churches to stay out of politics (an impossible task even if it is a leitmotiv of the separation of church and state), but rather a call on the churches to support the correct political program, depending of course on whom you happen to consult.

In the end, this call for the churches to stick to their business of providing consolation to the faithful is not going to get us very far. However, there is a deeper problem with Luxemburg's criticism of the Church, and that is her heavy moral tone. Her descriptions of the clergy, bourgeoisie and workers are all saturated with moral terms. For instance, while the clergy are “parasites,” infused with “hatred” towards

the socialists, using “lies and slander,” and while the bourgeoisie are “emasculated” and full of “hypocrisy” and “treachery,” the workers are “defenceless,” “despairing” and “hard-working.” Similarly, when she comes to speak of the Roman Empire in setting the scene for the emergence of Christianity, we find a description that is largely moralistic. The Roman overlords were corrupt, despotic and vile, living on the backs of their slaves who did all the work. She is at pains to show how the situation under the Roman Empire differs little, at least in terms of the patterns of exploitation, from that of her own day under capitalism.

The snares of such an approach are many, but let me begin with what may be called the argument from human nature. Human beings are naturally greedy, selfish and small-minded, looking out only for themselves at the expense of others. In theological parlance, this is of course the state of fallen nature: human beings are by default sinful creatures (a point made in its own way by the myth of the Fall in Genesis 3). Now, the immediate objection will be that Luxemburg does not make *that* argument. True enough, although at a political level, there is some mileage in the suggestion that capitalism is the most thorough systematization, at both economic and ideological levels, of human greed (it is a good point to make every now and then in response to the argument that human greed is to blame rather than any social formation). But the mileage is not so great, for it then leads to the unwelcome position that what we need is something like communism to forgive our sins, overcome our greed and set us on the path of a right relation with our fellow human beings. However, let me return to Luxemburg and the argument she does make: the Church and bourgeoisie are inherently greedy, corrupt, base and self-serving, whereas the poor, honest and defenceless working class is needlessly exploited by those greedy capitalists. A few years ago this would have been called an essentialist argument, in which the bourgeoisie, Church and working class are essentially evil or good. At this point, the old anti-essentialist argument has some bite, for in this form Luxemburg’s position assumes that the positions and predilections of the various classes are unchangeable: it is part of their nature to be so. Or, to make the argument less crude: they have been constructed through economic circumstances to be so.

At this point too we come to the second problem with Luxemburg’s heavily moral terminology, namely the slide from moralizing into ethics. Do we not have in Luxemburg’s texts (more than the two I am commenting on here) an ethical binary of

good and evil? This is the largest snare of her tendency to take the high moral ground (a well-worn political phrase that now carries an extra loading). Such an ethical opposition comes face to face with objections such as those of Sartre, Foucault and Freud. For each in their own way the opposition ensures the centrality of the self (as good) at the expense of others (as evil). For instance, for Freud it is then a narcissistic exercise that imposes the perspective of the self on others in terms of heroes (for Luxemburg, the working class) and villains (the Church and the bourgeoisie). Or, in Sartre's terms, it is a means of ensuring the self and marginalizing others as evil, or, in Foucault's terms, the opposition provides the mechanisms of policing the good and securing what is normal and abnormal through various institutions (see Jameson 2005: 58). We can go a step further and point out that the introduction of ethics is not so much an effort to deal in a deeply conservative manner with one's behavior towards and treatment of the "other," whatever that may be — human beings, animals, plants, earth and so on. Rather, ethics produces the category of the "other" in the very act of offering a way of relating to the other. To my mind, that is something we could well do without.

I am, then, not so enamored with Luxemburg's moral-cum-ethical positions, for they land us in far too many problems. And I am certainly less than keen to take them up in any further discussion of the interaction between Marxism and religion, for what she does here is replicate some of the more reprobate patterns of theological thinking.

Betraying the Spirit

While I do not want to remain locked in such an ethical opposition, in the end neither does Luxemburg, it seems to me. Her first step comes in an argument that will gain strength as I move along: the spirit of early Christianity, in its practice and teaching, was a socialist one; however, the Church has, for a number of historical reasons, betrayed this early spirit. Here is Luxemburg: "the clergy, which makes itself the spokesman of the rich, the defender of exploitation and oppression, places itself in flagrant contradiction to the Christian doctrine" (Luxemburg 2004 [1905]: 3). Luxemburg will use this intriguing argument for a number of purposes: to castigate the Church, to show the faithful workers that their faith is not in conflict with their deeply-felt political and economic desires, and to recuperate a longer tradition of socialism that pre-dates the nineteenth century. The first two reasons are quite

explicit in her argument, the latter more implicit.

At first, this argument by Luxemburg may seem like special pleading, or a curious piece of sophistry. Surely the Church was not a socialist movement in its early days! Indeed it was, she argues. There is still a decent rhetorical effect in a text like the following, where she draws on various biblical quotations to drive home her point:

The Social-Democrats propose to put an end to the exploitation of the toiling people by the rich. You would have that the servants of the Church would have been the first to make this task easier for the Social-Democrats. Did Jesus Christ (whose servants the priests are) teach that “it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of Heaven”? The Social-Democrats try to bring about in all countries social regimes based on the equality, liberty and fraternity of all the citizens. If the clergy really desire that the principle “Love thy neighbour as thyself” be applied in real life why do they not welcome keenly the propaganda of the Social Democrats? The Social Democrats try, by a desperate struggle, by the education and organization of the people, to draw them out of the downtrodden state in which they now are and to offer a better future to their children. Everyone should admit, that at this point, the clergy should bless the Social-Democrats, for did not he whom they serve, Jesus Christ, say “That you do for the poor you do for me”? (Luxemburg 2004 [1905]: 2-3)

Let me say a little about each of Luxemburg’s biblical citations. They are all drawn from the Gospels and all put in the mouth of Jesus by the writers of these texts. The first comes from Mark 10:25, although it is a common text for all the synoptic Gospels (see also Luke 18:25 and Matthew 19:24): “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” (quoted now from the Revised Standard Version). In each Gospel the context of the saying is the question of the rich young man (in Luke it is a “ruler”): “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life? (Mark 10; 17). When Jesus tells him — beyond observing the commandments — to go and sell all he has, give it to the poor and then to come and follow Jesus, the young man goes away in sorrow, since he had many possessions. And then, to his disciples, Jesus says, “How hard it will be for those

who have riches to enter the kingdom of God!” (Mark 10:23), following it up with the saying of the eye of the needle. It is a strong text, and one that Luxemburg uses to make her point that socialists work to end exploitation at the hands of the rich. This is, of course, a step beyond the saying in the Gospels, adding the point that wealth derives from exploitation. But what we should note at this point is the command to the rich young man: “You lack one thing; go, sell what you have, and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me” (Mark 10:21). This text resonates with those from the book of the Acts of the Apostles that will become the crux of Luxemburg’s argument concerning the communism of early Christianity.

The second text, “Love thy neighbor as thyself,” we find sprinkled throughout the New Testament. The greatest concentration comes in the Gospels (Matthew 19:19; 22:39; Mark 12:31, 33; Luke 10:27), but it is also found elsewhere (Romans 13:9; Galatians 5:14; James 2:8). In the Gospels it is the second of the great commandments, the other being “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength” (Mark 12:30; and, with slight variations, Matthew 22:37; Luke 10:27). However, for Paul this commandment sums all the others (Romans 13:9; Galatians 5:14), and this is the line that Luxemburg picks up: it really is the summary, the concise statement of Christian belief and practice. If so, then the clergy really should support the socialist campaign of liberty, equality and fraternity of all citizens. Except, of course, that there is nothing particularly socialist or social democratic about such a program; is it not the slogan of the French Revolution, of the newly strong bourgeoisie that she despises so much elsewhere? Not her strongest point, it seems to me, and Nietzsche’s strictures against Christian love — in which it is a weapon of domination and control over those to whom one shows love, or *caritas* as the Latin has it — cannot be forgotten at this point.

Her third biblical quotation is stronger. The full biblical text reads: “Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me” (Matthew 25:40). The quotation comes towards the end of a parable that remains one of the enabling motifs of Christian communism. It is the third of the so-called eschatological parables in Matthew 25, the first two being the parable of the five wise and five foolish maidens and the parable of the talents. This parable (of the sheep and goats) goes as follows: at the time of the coming of the “Son of Man,” he will, like a

shepherd, separate the sheep from the goats. To the sheep he says, “Come, O blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me” (Matthew 25:34-6). To the question from the sheep as to when they had in fact done these things, the Son of Man replies with the verse I quoted above. However, for the goats the obverse applies: they are banished to the colorful realm of eternal fire and punishment, a realm frequented by none other than the devil and his angels.

The stakes in this passage from Matthew are high, for it mixes a rather clear agenda of what would later be called social justice with the scene of the final judgment and all the usual paraphernalia of heaven and hell. What Christian communists tend to do is focus on the more palatable social justice dimension and quietly drop the stark contrast of eternal punishment and eternal life. The catch is that this story is not merely a prescription for a politics of compassion, one of social justice and of relieving the “downtrodden,” as Luxemburg puts it; rather, it is a full-scale myth. Set in the apocalyptic moment of end-time judgment, it is saturated with the imagery that one would expect with such a myth — heaven and hell, fire and glory, eternal life either with God or in punishment with the devil and his angels. How else to have a viable judgment scene at the end of history if there is no outcome for the judgment? What the myth does do — rather gratifyingly — is turn the whole idea of heaven as the reward for faithfulness, piety and religious commitment on its head, for rather than being fully aware of one’s piety as the means of salvation, it turns out that inadvertent acts of justice are what count in the end.

There is one last feature of Luxemburg’s use of this text from Matthew 25: the fuller story as I have excavated it here points to the fact that she too trades in mythological themes, albeit now of a distinctly political flavor (see Boer 2007b). Are not the exploiting capitalists, the conniving bourgeoisie and the venal clergy also condemned in their own way to eternal damnation, although it is a damnation of a more economic and political nature? Are they not the goats, to use the image from Matthew’s Gospel, the bourgeoisie and the Church, and are not the working class, with the socialists at their head, the sheep — the ones who gave food and drink to the hungry and thirsty, who clothed the naked, welcomed the stranger, visited the sick and

came to those in prison?

A Little Church History

Now for Luxemburg's rather intriguing re-reading of Church history, which seeks to provide a thumb-nail sketch of the way the role and place of the Church changed within the shifting economic formations of some 1900 years. And the reason for Luxemburg's step into Church history lies in her desire to find the way out of an anomaly: if the New Testament presents a picture of the first Christians as devoted to justice for the poor, to communism in living and to providing refuge for the oppressed, how did the Church end up as it is now, as a friend of the rich and powerful, as a supporter of the status quo, as an institution with a distinct financial and political interest in ensuring its place within the economic infrastructure? The answer lies in history: "In order to understand this strange phenomenon, it is sufficient to glance over the history of the Church and to examine the evolution through which it has passed in the course of the centuries" (Luxemburg 2004 [1905]: 4).

Luxemburg's reconstruction is, quite simply, that the Church of the exploited became the Church of the exploiters. A movement which began with a message of consolation to the poor and as a collective practice of the community of riches gradually changed over time to become part of the ruling classes in the Middle Ages and then changed again to join the ranks of the owners of capital under capitalism. The main features of her reconstruction, which comprises the bulk of her *Socialism and the Churches*, are a reliance on the Marxist modes of production narrative, the outline of the Church's economic and political status within each phase or mode of production, and then the transitions from one mode to the other. Let me say a little more about each one.

To begin with, she accepts the structuring role of the sequence of modes of production as they were being defined at the time she wrote. It moves from a slave-based system under the Roman Empire when Christianity emerged, through a feudal system that followed in Europe and then to the more recent transition to capitalism. Within each social formation, she takes as axiomatic Marx and Engels's key to the motor of history: "The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggle" (Marx and Engels 1975-2004, vol. 6: 482). And in the fundamental antagonism between oppressor and oppressed that such a struggle assumes, the

Christian Church finds itself firstly among the oppressed in the slave-based system of the Roman Empire, but then it shifts allegiance to become one of the oppressors in the subsequent social formations.

Luxemburg also accepts, albeit implicitly, the class antagonism that Marx and Engels outline in the *Manifesto of the Communist Party* (Marx and Engels 1975-2004, vol. 6: 482, 585). For instance, the oppositions of freeman and slave, and of patrician and plebeian are drawn from the Greek and Roman eras — the second opposition being specifically Roman. And then the pairs of lord and serf, guild-master and journeyman come from the feudal period. So, if the early Church attracted slaves and plebeians, then by the Middle Ages it formed a class of its own that was closer to the lords than serfs or journeymen.

The crucial moment — or rather, process — is when the Church moves from oppressor to oppressed, from an organization that suffers at the hands of the rich and powerful to one that hobnobs with those who have acquired wealth on the backs of others. Here Luxemburg follows a variation of the conventional Marxist narrative of differentiation: from an original community of equality, where everything was held in common, differentiation insinuates itself so that we end up with the old opposition of rich and poor, powerful and powerless. So it was with the early Christian community. But every narrative of differentiation needs a trigger, and for Luxemburg that is size: as the Christians grew in number it was no longer possible to live in small communist groups. Eventually the rich traded the sharing of their wealth for almsgiving to the poor, which became only a portion of their wealth and not all of it, and then they absented themselves from the communities and the common meals, which were left to the poor church members. Size also becomes the trigger of another feature of differentiation, namely the clergy as a leadership structure, which became necessary to manage the ever-increasing movement. And so the goods that were once shared in common, and which were then given to the poor, were devoted more and more to maintaining the clergy and church buildings. Once this process of differentiation was under way, the next step was the adoption of Christianity as the state religion, with state funding for buildings and a hierocratic structure under Constantine (some time between the battle of the Milvian Bridge in 312 and his death in 337). From there the path leads to the Church's feudal privileges, ruling class status, accumulation of wealth and property, and role as a rich exploiter of the poor through tithes and labor

dues.

But what happens to the Church when the feudal order crumbled and was swept away? Did it not lose its status and landed wealth along with the deposed feudal lords? Did not the bourgeoisie wrest control of education and learning, as well as the care of the poor and the sick, away from the Church? Like the rest of the old aristocracy, the Church did not merely resign itself to its fate and crawl away to lick its wounds. It was much wiler than that, transforming itself into an owner of capital. Despite its apparent loss of temporal power (here she speaks directly of the Roman Catholic Church), it became a business enterprise in its own right — Luxemburg provides some telling figures on the capital of the Church in Austria and France to back up her argument.

There are a few problems with her narrative. I am less interested in the charge that she is a bit thin on the details and resources, for it was a pamphlet designed for popular consumption. More of a problem is her characterization of the Roman Empire of the early Christian era as corrupt and collapsing. In part this was a rather conventional narrative, which argued that Rome collapsed due to corruption, the loss of civic and manly virtue, and a few too many lax morals. If the picture of the Roman Empire is a little schematic, then her rapidly-drawn picture of the medieval Church also suffers from tendency towards ideal types. While the Church loses any sense of its communist roots to become an exploiting class, the peasants are poor, defenceless people taxed and worked to the hilt. It would of course water down her story, but some sense at least of the complexity of medieval life would have helped. I think here of the whole area of peasant religion, with its incorporation of pagan elements into an earthy Christianity, its carnivals and license, its celebrations of fertility and magic. In other words, some sense of peasant resistance would have helped. So also would the re-emergence from time to time of that utopian image of the early Church from the book of Acts in one movement after another, from the communities of monks living in poverty such as the Franciscans, to the rebellious Hutterites, Albigensians and the followers of the apocalyptic Joachim of Fiore.

Yet, for all its shortcomings it is a not a bad narrative. Its genius lies initially in the appeal it made at the time it was written (1905) to the many who flooded into her Polish socialist party, the Social Democracy of the Kingdom of Poland and Lithuania, at the time it was written. In the revolutionary mood of that period, the

mass strikes, the street protests, and the swell of support for the socialists, Luxemburg was at the forefront of making Marxism understood by all the new recruits who knew virtually nothing about it. Rather than the characterization of a godless, anti-clerical political movement, she sought to reassure those who held religious beliefs that socialism was not incompatible with those beliefs.

A further reason for its genius is that it is a bold act of rewriting history. As Foucault has shown us so powerfully, a crucial way of recasting and challenging the present and future is by telling different stories of the past — or rather, by telling a different narrative of how we got here and where we are going. Let me put it more strongly: one of the most effective political tools is to rewrite history, for the future rests upon a narrative of the past that sets up such a future in the first place. Thus, when the future seems to be set along a certain inevitable path, then retelling the story that led to that future opens up the possibility of an alternative future or two. In other words, to generate a different future, rewrite the past. This is precisely what Luxemburg is doing in her reconstruction of Church history.

Anti-Clericalism

In light of such a reconstruction, one would expect that Luxemburg would take every opportunity to condemn the Church, for its exploitation of the working class, for its enmeshment with capitalism, for its hypocrisy in betraying its roots, and so on. Although she does let loose on the Church on more than one occasion, she is still not willing to make anti-clericalism into a plank of socialist politics. In order to see why she refuses to do so, we need to consider her essay, “An Anti-Clerical Policy of Socialism” (Luxemburg 2004 [1903]). Apart from the interest of the argument itself, it also provides another reason — apart from the argument that the Church has betrayed its original spirit — for her valorization of Christian communism.

In that essay Luxemburg makes two points, namely that socialism should not endorse anti-clericalism as an absolute aim, for in doing so it loses sight of the class struggle, and that the bourgeois program is slippery and inconsistent, in contrast to the consistency of socialism. Let me take the second point first: for Luxemburg, the bourgeoisie espouses anti-clericalism as a fundamental platform and yet doesn’t live up to its high-flying ideals. Focusing on France, she points out that anti-clericalism is a distinctly bourgeois strategy, one that derives from the French Revolution. And

France, with its battles between a middle-class Parliament and a reactionary Church, is the paradigm which shows that anti-clericalism is distinctly bourgeois. In its drive for purely secular power and secular state institutions, especially education, the bourgeoisie is the natural enemy of the Church: “care of the poor, the sick, the school, all these functions belong at present to the modern State” (Luxemburg 2004 [1903]: 5).

All the same, the bourgeoisie is inconsistent, for it does not actually carry out a full program of secularization. Instead, it seeks to split the Church by approving some religious orders and not approving others. Funds may continue to flow to those sanctioned by the state, and the secular bourgeois state wages war only against the non-authorized orders. Or, in the case of education and care of the sick, the state seeks to wrest control away from the Church, while allowing the Church to continue in its other functions. What actually happens is that middle-class anti-clericalism “really consolidates the power of the Church” (Luxemburg 2004 [1903]: 7). By contrast, socialism has the only consistent approach: it wants the complete abolition of all state support for and recognition of the Church. Only in this way will the Church cease to have a major hand in the ruling classes. Over against the fickle approach of the bourgeoisie, the socialists should actually push the bourgeois state to carry out its secular principles completely: it should not merely take control of education, and the care of the poor and the sick, but it should confiscate all Church property and abolish what is left of ecclesiastical privilege.

At this point, it would seem that despite its political rhetoric, the bourgeoisie’s anti-clericalism is completely hollow, while that of socialism is far more radical. Luxemburg will go on to argue what appears to be a contradictory position — that socialism sees anti-clericalism as a red herring. Before I turn to that argument, it seems to me that Luxemburg has moved a little too quickly in accusing the bourgeoisie of being inconsistent. If we come at the problem from the side of the consistency of socialism, then that consistency is due to its focus on class conflict, on the need to overcome the ruling classes and their abuse of power in order to exploit workers. In other words, socialism has a distinct political program that is at its heart economic: the relief of working class exploitation. In this light, the middle-class may seem inconsistent, but does it not also have an underlying program? Is that not one of gaining, holding and securing its position as the new ruling class? In this light, the

bourgeoisie's inconsistencies become apparent rather than real: in its drive to ruling power, it seeks whatever allegiances that will further its program and that includes the Church when such an alliance gives the bourgeoisie an advantage. Even more, the hoary adage of politics — divide and conquer — applies all too well to bourgeois relations to the Church: a divided Church, one part on side and one part not, warring within itself, is far easier to conquer than one united and hostile.

Both options are also relevant to the bourgeoisie's dealing with the Left. If it is to the advantage of the bourgeoisie, then it will seek alliances with the working class; and then, if that alliance is with a part of the working class, it all too successfully divides the working class and weakens it as a foe. This is where I move to Luxemburg's second argument, namely that in putting its weight behind bourgeois anti-clericalism, the working class loses sight of the class struggle. On this point she is quite astute, for by gaining socialist support for anti-clericalism, the bourgeoisie splits the working class and shifts the emphasis of its battles from class exploitation to taking on the Church. Reluctant to give the bourgeoisie so much credit, what Luxemburg does not say is that this is a very clever strategy: anti-clericalism looks like it should be an item in the working-class program, for under feudalism the Church was very much part of the ruling classes, and it continues to struggle as hard as it can to regain such a position. So it would seem natural that the working class should side with the bourgeoisie in order to cut down the Church's efforts to remain part of the ruling classes.

What Luxemburg does say is that if socialists place all their eggs in the basket of anti-clericalism, thinking that it is the basis of radical politics, they lose sight of their main objective, which is to free the workers from economic exploitation. Indeed, for Luxemburg, anti-clericalism is “one of the best ways of turning away the attention of the working-class from social questions, and of weakening the class struggle” (Luxemburg 2004 [1903]: 6). The unwelcome result is that the bourgeoisie manages to enlist the working class in its campaign against the Church, thereby obscuring the more fundamental class differences between the middle class and the working class. For it is the bourgeoisie who are the new exploiters, they are the ones the working class needs to overthrow.

At this point in the logic of her argument she seems to come to a glaring contradiction. On the one hand, she has argued that socialists should call on the

bourgeoisie to realize their secularizing program, abolish all Church privilege and confiscate all Church property; on the other hand, she argues that anti-clericalism is not a core socialist position, indeed that it dilutes the proper focus of socialist agitation. There is of course a deeper consistency: insofar as a full secularization, specifically in the form of a full separation of Church and state, is the removal of one powerful section of the ruling classes, then it should be supported. However, such a policy should not blind the working class to the other reality, namely that the dominant new ruling class is the bourgeoisie. So, they too should be overcome, and socialism should not skew that effort by allying itself wholly with bourgeois anti-clericalism.

Anti-clericalism, then, is a valid policy for two reasons: it shows up the inconsistencies of the bourgeoisie, who should be pushed to realize their anti-clerical policy in full, and it challenges the Church's enmeshment with capitalism. It is not, however, a fundamental platform of socialist politics. This position opens up the possibility of Luxemburg's valorization of Christian socialism. And the reasons for such a valorization boil down to three: if anti-clericalism is not a basic factor in socialist politics, then in other circumstances socialism may well have a more positive approach to the Church, and indeed religion more generally; even if the Church is now an owner of capital and thereby an exploiter, it was not always so; if the Church has betrayed its original spirit, then that original spirit was obviously something rather different. It is to that different picture that I now turn.

Christian Socialism

What I would like to do with Luxemburg's argument for an early Christian communism is take this reconstruction as a political myth, and such a myth has an enabling and virtual power with historical consequences. In other words, the myth of Christian communism may initially be an image, using figurative and metaphorical language that expresses a hope concerning communal living, but once it becomes an authoritative and canonical text, it gains a historical power of its own. It becomes the motivation for repeated and actual attempts at Christian communism. In this sense, it is possible to say that the myth of Christian communism will have been true at some future moment (for a fuller discussion see Boer 2007b).

As for Luxemburg, the whole argument of her long essay, *Socialism and the*

Churches, hinges on the idea that the first Christian communities were communist, even though it was a communism of consumption rather than production. The key text comes from the Acts of the Apostles 4:32-5:

Now the company of all those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said any of the things which he possessed was his own, but they had everything in common. And with great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. There was not a needy person among them, for as many as were possessors of lands or houses sold them, and brought the proceeds of what was sold and laid it at the apostles' feet; and distribution was made to each as any had need.

We can see here a distinct echo of the famous slogan, “from each according to his abilities, to each according to his need!” (Marx and Engels 1975-2004 vol. 24: 87), although what Luxemburg picks up are two other features of this text: that “they had everything in common” and that those who had lands and houses sold them and brought the proceeds to the apostles. Acts 2:44-5 summarizes these two points rather nicely: “And all who believed were together and had all things in common; and they sold their possessions and goods and distributed them to all, as any had need.” Add to this both the practice of having meals in common and the abolition of family life (Luxemburg 2004 [1905]: 8), as well as the story of the rich young man from the Gospels, where Jesus tells him, “You lack one thing; go, sell what you have, and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me” (Mark 10:21; see Matthew 19:21 and Luke 18:22), and we have a theme that has become a powerful current in Christian political thought and practice.

Now, Luxemburg takes this description as a report of real and general communal practice among the early Christians. She goes so far as to back it up with a quotation from an unspecified writer, a church historian (albeit from 1780), and then some quotations from the Church Fathers, Saint Basil in the 4th century, John Chrysostom (347-407 CE) and then Gregory the Great from the 6th century. None of these count all that well as evidence, since they show how the story in Acts gained a distinct historical effect — they believed it happened and sought to enact Christian communism later on. And the church historian Vogel is no evidence at all, for he was

merely offering a paraphrase of Acts itself, assuming it to be a somewhat accurate report of the early Church.

In order to back up her argument, Luxemburg tries to situate the early Church within the Roman Empire, at least as she sees the situation. It is a rather loose reconstruction, locating the early appeal of Christianity among impoverished peasants. Losing their small holdings to the ever-increasing estates of the absent landlords, who then worked those estates with slaves, these freemen either succumbed to debt slavery or fled to cities like Rome. However, without a manufacturing base there was little work for them, so they relied on the insufficient corn dole to feed themselves and their families. In this situation, she argues, Christianity “appeared to these unhappy beings as a life-belt, a consolation and an encouragement, and became, right from the beginning, the religion of the Roman proletarians” (Luxemburg 2004 [1905]: 6). Given their economic situation, these early Christians demanded an equal share of all resources, especially those that the rich hoarded for themselves. It was a communism born of dire economic circumstances — “What could be more natural?” she asks (Luxemburg 2004 [1905]: 6-7).

Luxemburg’s picture of the Roman Empire is a little thin on detail (where are the slaves in this early Church, for instance?), and she is keen to draw as many parallels between the Roman Empire and Czarist Russia, where a despotic regime sought to keep the lid on revolutionary currents. But I am more interested in two features of this reconstruction of the early Church: the tactical effort to show that the economic situation of the early Church is analogous to the situation in which she writes; and the argument that the early Church was a lower class phenomenon.

As far as the first feature is concerned, I pointed out earlier that Luxemburg writes for the mass of new members of the Social Democratic Party of Lithuania and Poland, for which she functioned as the main ideologue from her base in Berlin, in order to show that the socialists provide a viable social and economic response to dire economic circumstances in the same way that the early Church did during the Roman Empire. Her deliberate use of the Latin term “proletarians” is a ploy in this argument: in the same way the lower classes in the Roman Empire were known as proletarians, so also are the workers under capitalism (for whom the term was appropriated and reworked). Not only does she draw upon Engels here (Marx and Engels 1975-2004 vol.27: 445-69), but she characteristically pushes her argument as far as it will go:

making use of an argument from origins that is close to the agenda of radical groups throughout the history of Christianity, she argues that the socialists embody the socially salvific agenda of the early Church, so much so that should Jesus appear in her time, he would side with the socialists: “And, if Christ were to appear on earth today, he would surely attack the priests, the bishops and archbishops who defend the rich and live by exploiting the unfortunate, as formerly he attacked the merchants whom he drove from the temple so that their ignoble presence should not defile the House of God” (Luxemburg 2004 [1905]: 26). As I will point out in a moment, she will take a step further to argue that socialists will complete what was begun by the early Christians.

Secondly, she argues that the early Church appealed to and drew its membership from among the poor. In Marxist studies, this idea goes back to Engels, who writes in his *On the History of Early Christianity*: “Christianity was originally a movement of oppressed people: it first appeared as a religion of slaves and freedmen, of poor people deprived of all rights, of peoples subjugated or dispersed by Rome” (Marx and Engels 1975-2004: 447). Surprisingly, Engels is also the source of the idea in New Testament studies and church history. Able to read Koine (New Testament) Greek, having renounced with difficulty his evangelical (in the old German sense) faith, and keeping up with biblical studies, Engels was no amateur on these matters. By the early 20th century it became the consensus among New Testament scholars (Deissman 1978 [1908], 1929) and among sociologists (Troeltsch 1992 [1911]) and held sway until the 1960s. From then, however, reaction set in and the older argument that predates Engels regained favor: Christianity drew its membership from the middle and upper strata of Roman society (see Stark 1996: 29-48). In the end, however, the evidence is not conclusive or at best rather slim. And one cannot help but be a little suspicious about such swings of the pendulum in biblical studies.

All the same, these developments show up two slips in Luxemburg’s argument. The first is that the very text from Acts upon which she relies also mentions those who were “possessors of lands or houses” (Acts 4:35). Even this mythical story includes at least a few of the wealthier citizens. Further, there is a distinct difference between the image in Acts, which paints an ideal picture of the early Christian community in Jerusalem, and the later communities in other cities of the Roman Empire such as Corinth and Rome. Now, the studies of the class

composition of early Christianity focus on these later communities and tend to leave alone the account in Acts. Luxemburg's mistake, then, is to assume that the story in Acts applies to all Christian communities.

This is where the more recent studies of early revolutionary and messianic movements in 1st century Judaea come into play, for the "Jesus movement" was one of these. For example, Richard Horsley argues that these revolutionary movements drew their numbers from the rural poor suffering under a Roman yoke, engaging in slowdowns, sabotage, scribal writings, counter-terrorism, and revolts (Horsley 1989, 1992, 1995, 1996; Horsley and Hanson 1985). If this is the case, then Luxemburg's question is still valid: when did the change from a messianic peasant movement to a respectable social movement drawn from the middle and upper strata of Roman society take place? For some, such as Jorunn Økland (forthcoming), the first signs of this shift come very early indeed, particularly with that central ideologue Paul. Keen not to alter the status quo — slaves and women should accept their lots in life and not seek to change anything (1 Corinthians 7: 21-3, 39) — Paul develops the idea of a "spiritual messianism" and a heavenly Kingdom. Removed from the earlier revolutionary messianism and the earthly Kingdom of Jesus and company, this spiritual messianism was to become profoundly influential in the early Church. Even at this very early point, a decade after the death of Jesus, and in the earliest written texts in the New Testament, Paul represents a second movement of early Christianity that sought to moderate and modify the Christian movement in light of the more well-to-do economic and social circumstances of the Church's Jewish members and proselytes. No wonder the early Church became respectable.

In light of these developments — that Paul marks the first moderating effect and that the early Christian communities in the Roman Empire were rather respectable — we find ourselves with arguments that undermine Luxemburg's historical assumptions. Add to that the extremely unreliable nature of the book of Acts as a historical document at all (Penner 2004; Koester 1982, vol 2: 98-99, 315-23) and her argument begins to look rather thin. Even without the issue of the unreliable nature of Acts, the early Church turns out to be less like the workers to whom she addressed her essay and more like the bourgeoisie to whom she is so vehemently opposed — although I am extremely wary of drawing such analogies across vastly different social and economic systems such as the Ancient mode of production of the Roman Empire

and capitalism.

Strangely, these historical arguments do not seem to have much impact on the effect of texts such as those in Acts 4:32-35 and Acts 2:44-5. What I mean is that they have become influential political myths, especially outside the small circle of biblical scholarship, a status that may even be enhanced by the unhistorical nature of these texts. For the communist nature of that mythical early community — a paradise-like myth of origins if ever there was one — has continued and continues to influence movements throughout of Christian history, such as the Franciscan order within the Roman Catholic Church, or the communist efforts of Gerrard Winstanley and the Diggers in 17th century England, or the Icarian communes of Étienne Cabet (1788-1856) in the USA, or the various Christian communes that exist today. Their virtual power as political myth shows up in a somewhat different context as well: I have found that when — for my sins — I used to speak to church groups about these texts, especially those from secure and leafy middle-class suburbs, the listeners found them profoundly uncomfortable. With their status as founding myth of the Christian church, they seemed a far cry from the self-serving and nuclear lives that most of these people led.

However, I do want to insist on the point I made above concerning the unreliability of this image in Acts, an image that is so important for Luxemburg. Rather than her effort to fix such a moment historically, or indeed for New Testament scholars to do so, I prefer a different tack. It may be stated in terms of the following contradiction: the less historically reliable such a story is, the more powerful it is as a political myth. Even further, it is important to insist that this picture of the early Christian community rests on the flimsiest of evidence — the book of Acts — since only then can we avoid the tendency of trying to restore some pristine state that has been disrupted by a “fall,” whenever that moment took place. The more the belief holds that Acts presents what was once a real, lived experience, the more efforts to restore that ideal early church become reactionary. For any effort at restoring what was lost, of overcoming a “fall,” is reactionary in the first degree. Such efforts have bedeviled movements within the Church over two millennia, movements that have sought in their own ways to return to that first community. What happens in these efforts is that the mythical early church becomes a desirable point of origin that needs to be retrieved. However, if we insist that the communal life of the early Church is

myth, that it projects a wish as to what might be, that it gives us a powerful image of what may still be achieved, then we are able to overcome the reactionary desire to return to the early church in the book of Acts and perhaps turn it to radical ends.

Consumption Versus Production

For all her misdirected efforts to recover an authentic original Christian communism, Luxemburg is not so overcome with a romanticized image of the early Church not to see problems. For her the major problem is that the image we find in Acts is a communism of consumption rather than one of production. In the end, she argues, such a communism of consumption will not get us very far. It is both limited in the size of the commune and in duration, for a communism of consumption is possible only as long as there are riches to share and goods to sell. Here is Luxemburg:

But this communism was based on the consumption of finished products and not on work, and proved itself incapable of reforming society, of putting an end to the inequality between men and throwing down the barrier which separated rich from poor. . . . Suppose, for example, that the rich proprietors, influenced by the Christian doctrine, offered to share up between the people all the riches which they possessed in the form of money, cereals, fruit, clothing and animals, what would the result be? Poverty would disappear for several weeks and during this the time the populace would be able to feed and clothe themselves. But the finished products are quickly used up. After a short lapse of time, the people, having consumed the distributed riches, would once again have empty hands (Luxemburg 2004 [1905]: 9-10).

Apart from the Christian communities themselves, nothing has in fact changed within the economic structures as a whole. In fact, it would rely on the rich producing more, by means of their slaves, so that they could once again share their wealth with the Christian community — “That would be to draw water in a sieve!” (Luxemburg 2004 [1905]: 10). Should they also sell their means of production, then the Christian communities would quickly starve. Already within early Christian communism the logic of giving alms to the poor arose, for such a system could only be maintained if the rich kept making surpluses and kept on giving it to the poor.

At this point, argues Luxemburg, the socialists differ from early Christian communism, for the socialists demand a more fundamental change in the means of production. While the Christian communists “did not demand that the land, the workshops and the instruments of work should become collective property, but only that everything should be divided up among them, houses, clothing, food and finished products most necessary to life,” the socialists seek to make into common property the actual “instruments of work, the means of production, in order that all humanity may work and live in harmonious unity” (Luxemburg 2004 [1905]: 7).

Completing Christian Communism

What all of this means is that socialism will complete what Christian communism began. Its intention may have been right — an ardent belief in communism — but it needs to go a step further: not merely the products of an economy need to be held in common, but the means of production themselves. Her rather arresting conclusion is then that socialism is in fact the logical outcome of Christianity: “What the Christian Apostles could not accomplish by their ardent discourses against the egoism of the rich, the modern proletarians, workers conscious of their class-position, can start working in the near future, by the conquest of political power in all countries by tearing the factories, the land, and all the means of production from the capitalists to make them the communal property of the workers” (Luxemburg 2004 [1905]: 23). If it is not quite Ernst Bloch’s argument that atheistic Marxism is the messianic realization of the rebellious stream in Judaism and Christianity (Bloch 1972: 240; 1985, vol 14: 317), it certainly comes close.

In contrast to Christian communism, with its alms and charity, with its taking from the rich and giving to the poor, socialism points out that a proper communism is possible only when the land and all other means of production are placed in the hands of the producers themselves, the workers, who will produce what each one needs. In other words, to the Christian communists the socialists say, “You want communism? We’ll give you real communism!”

Freedom of Conscience

Not so much a “curious piece of historical sophistry,” for all its flaws, Luxemburg’s story of Christian communism and her effort to account for its

disappearance in the history of the Church taps into a powerful political myth, one that she in fact had a good hand in embellishing and perpetuating. It was of course also a tactical ploy in the circumstances in which it was written, seeking to show how socialism has more in common with certain — especially subversive — elements of Christianity than one might think. That such an argument should have made more than one “godless communist” uncomfortable goes without saying. It has also made more than one “good Christian” uncomfortable. Rather than seeking to distance socialism from Christianity, she has not merely acknowledged the affinities but made them a virtue.

Yet, her argument has one more surprising outcome, namely the argument for a freedom of conscience regarding religious belief:

The Social-Democrats, those of the whole world and of our own country, regard conscience and personal opinions as being sacred. Every man may hold what faith and what opinions seem likely to him to ensure happiness. No one has the right to persecute or to attack the particular religious opinion of others. That is what the socialists think (Luxemburg 2004 [1905]: 2).

Luxemburg is astute enough to see that “liberty of conscience” cuts both ways. If she challenges the thought police of the Czarist regime in Russia and Russian controlled Poland, which persecuted Catholics, Jews, heretics and freethinkers, and if she challenges the efforts of the Church to control what people believe by whatever means available, from state power to the Inquisition, then she will not argue that the socialists should exercise the same type of censorship and control. And the logical outcome of such an approach is that freedom of conscience also applies to religious belief.

There is, as always, a tactical element to her argument, namely that in contrast to the Church’s propaganda the large number of those with religious commitment in her party need not worry about the incompatibility of their beliefs with the programs of the party. But there is also a deeper issue here. I for one had always taken the idea of freedom of conscience as much a fiction (no one does in fact have full freedom of conscience) as a central element in the ideology of liberalism with its valorization of the private individual. I must admit to being not so enamored with Luxemburg’s statement that “religion is a private affair” (Luxemburg 2004 [1903]: 2), for this falls

too far into such a liberal ideological position. Since it is so much a part of the realm of the sacrosanct individual, I have always been profoundly suspicious of and opposed to the idea of freedom of conscience.

However, there is a double paradox in such an idea that Luxemburg shows up somewhat unwittingly. The first one is that the slogan of “freedom of conscience,” especially in the hands of those who propagate it these days, produces the opposite. Thus, in the hands of a Friedrich von Hayek (Hayek 1960) or a Milton Friedman (Friedman 2002), the link between freedom and capitalism, or freedom of conscience and freedom of speech with the so-called “free market,” always ends up being oppressive, producing widespread exploitation, poverty and environmental destruction. Or, in the hands of an imperial power such as the United States, “freedom” becomes the ideological justification for invasion and occupation — without even seeing the contradiction, they seek to impose “freedom” on countries (most recently Afghanistan and Iraq), with disastrous consequences. This first paradox is perhaps best caught up in a slogan of the political right, “freedom through firepower.”

There is, however, a second and far more interesting paradox. Rather than throwing out the baby of freedom of conscience with the bathwater of liberal ideology, it seems to me that socialism too has a paradox that turns on freedom of conscience. As a movement that operates primarily from a collective perspective, one would expect that freedom of conscience would be far from such a program — at least if one believes the critics of socialism such as Hayek, for whom collective will is actually a cover for the imposition of dictator’s will. By contrast, a fully collective program is precisely one that does not seek to impose the will of one over the other. It is, if you like, the complex effort to allow each one in the collective to express her or his beliefs, foibles and obsessions without the imposition of control and censorship. So I end with a dialectical point: only a fully collective program will enable the full realization of freedom of conscience. And that applies as much to religious belief as to anything else. To me, at least, this is the deepest lesson from Luxemburg’s *Socialism and the Churches*.

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