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Opiate of the People?

# Marxism and Religion

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**The Marxist view of religion has been greatly over-simplified, typically identified with the well-worn refrain that it's the "opiate of the people." Michael Löwy challenges this misconception, and presents us with a much more nuanced view of Marxism and religion.**

Is religion still, as Marx and Engels saw it in the nineteenth century, a bulwark of reaction, obscurantism and conservatism? To a large extent, the answer is yes. Their view still applies to many Catholic institutions, to the fundamentalist currents of the main confessions (Christian, Jewish or Muslim), to most evangelical groups (and their expression in the so-called "Electronic Church") and to the majority of the new religious sects -some of which, such as the notorious Moon Church, are nothing but a skilful combination of financial manipulations, obscurantist brain-washing and fanatical anti-communism.

## Liberation Theology

However, the emergence of revolutionary Christianity and Liberation Theology in Latin America (and elsewhere) opens a new historical chapter and raises exciting new questions which cannot be answered without a renewal of the Marxist analysis of religion, the subject of this article.

The well-known phrase that religion is the "opiate of the people" is considered as the quintessence of the Marxist conception of the religious phenomenon by most of its supporters and its opponents. How far is this an accurate viewpoint?

[<https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/justice.jpg>]

First of all, one should emphasize that this statement is not at all specifically Marxist. The same phrase can be found, in various contexts, in the writings of German philosophers Kant, Herder, Feuerbach, Bruno Bauer, Moses Hess and Heinrich Heine. For instance, in his essay on Ludwig Börne (1840), Heine already uses it in a rather positive (although ironical) way: "Welcome be a religion that pours into the bitter chalice of the suffering human species some sweet, soporific drops of spiritual opium, some drops of love, hope and faith."

Moses Hess, in his essays published in Switzerland in 1843, takes a more critical (but still ambiguous) stand: "Religion can make bearable...the unhappy consciousness of serfdom...in the same way as opium is of good help in painful diseases."

## Hegel

The expression appeared shortly afterwards in Marx's article on the German philosopher Hegel's Philosophy of Right (1844). An attentive reading of the paragraph where this phrase appears, reveals that it is more qualified and less one-sided than usually believed. Although obviously critical of religion, Marx takes into account the dual character of the phenomenon: "Religious distress is at the same time the expression of real distress and the protest against real distress. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, just as it is the spirit of an unspiritual situation. It is the opiate of the people."

If one reads the whole essay, it appears clearly that Marx's viewpoint owes more to left neo-Hegelianism, which saw religion as the alienation of the human essence, than to Enlightenment philosophy, which simply denounced it as a clerical conspiracy. In fact when Marx wrote the above passage he was still a disciple of Feuerbach, and a neo-Hegelian. His analysis of religion was therefore "pre-Marxist," without any class reference, and rather ahistorical. But it had a dialectical quality, grasping the contradictory character of the religious "distress": both a legitimation of existing conditions and a protest against it.

It was only later, particularly in *The German Ideology* (1846), that the proper Marxist study of religion as a social and historical reality began. The key element of this new method for the analysis of religion is to approach it as one of the many forms of ideology - i.e. of the spiritual production of a people, of the production of ideas, representations and consciousness, necessarily conditioned by material production and the corresponding social relations.

Although he uses from time to time the concept of "reflection" - which will lead several generations of Marxists into a sterile side-track - the key idea of the book is the need to explain the genesis and development of the various forms of consciousness (religion, ethics, philosophy, etc) by the social relations, "by which means, of course, the whole thing can be depicted in its totality (and therefore, too, the reciprocal action of these various sides on one another)."

After writing, with Engels, *The German Ideology*, Marx paid very little attention to religion as such, i.e. as a specific cultural/ideological universe of meaning. One can find, however, in the first volume of *Capital*, some interesting methodological remarks; for instance, the well-known footnote where he answers to the argument according to which the importance of politics in the Ancient times, and of religion in the Middle-Age reveal the inadequacy of the materialist interpretation of history: "Neither could the Middle-Age live from Catholicism, nor Antiquity from politics. The respective economic conditions explain, in fact, why Catholicism there and politics here played the dominant role."

Marx will never bother to provide the economic reasons for the importance of medieval religion, but this passage is quite important, because it acknowledges that, under certain historical circumstances, religion can indeed play a decisive role in the life of a society.

In spite of his general lack of interest in religion, Marx paid attention to the relationship between Protestantism and capitalism. Several passages in *Capital* make reference to the contribution of Protestantism to the early emergence of capitalism-for instance by stimulating the expropriation of Church property and communal pastures.

## Protestantism

In the *Grundrisse* he makes - half a century before German sociologist Max Weber's famous essay *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* the following illuminating comment on the intimate association between Protestantism and capitalism: "The cult of money has its asceticism, its self-denial, its self-sacrifice-economy and frugality, contempt for mundane, temporal and fleeting pleasures; the chase after the eternal treasure. Hence the connection between English Puritanism or Dutch Protestantism and money-making." The parallel (but not identity!) with Weber's thesis is astonishing - the more so since Weber could not have read this passage (the *Grundrisse* was published for the first time in 1940).

On the other hand, Marx often referred to capitalism as a "religion of daily life" based on the fetishism of commodities. He described capital as "a Moloch that requires the whole world as a due sacrifice," and capitalist progress as a "monstrous pagan god, that only wanted to drink nectar in the skulls of the dead."

His critique of political economy is peppered with frequent references to idolatry: Baal, Moloch, Mammon, the Golden Calf and, of course, the concept of "fetish" itself. But this language has rather a metaphorical than a substantial meaning in terms of the sociology of religion.

## Engels

Engels displayed a much greater interest than Marx in religious phenomena and their historic role. Engels' main contribution to the Marxist study of religions is his analysis of the relationship of religious representations to class struggle. Over and beyond the philosophical polemic of "materialism against idealism" he was interested in understanding and explaining concrete social and historical forms of religion. Christianity no longer appeared (like in Feuerbach) as a timeless "essence", but as a cultural system undergoing transformations in different historical periods: first as a religion of the slaves, later as the state ideology of the Roman Empire, then tailored to feudal hierarchy and finally adapted to bourgeois society. It thus appears as a symbolic space fought over by antagonistic social forces-for instance, in the sixteenth century, feudal theology, bourgeois Protestantism and plebeian heresies.

Occasionally his analysis slips towards a narrowly utilitarian, instrumental interpretation of religious movements: "each of the different classes uses its own appropriate religion... and it makes little difference whether these gentlemen believe in their respective religions or not."

[<https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/romeropopolo.jpg>]

Salvadorean marchers carry banner of Archbishop Oscar Romero, assassinated by the death squads, San Salvador 1980

Engels seems to find nothing but the "religious disguise" of class interests in the different forms of belief. However, thanks to his class-struggle method, he realized-unlike the Enlightenment philosophers - that the clergy was not a socially homogeneous body: in certain historical conjunctures, it divided itself according to its class composition. Thus during the Reformation, we have on the one side the high clergy, the feudal summit of the hierarchy, and on the other, the lower clergy, which supplied the ideologues of the Reformation and of the revolutionary peasant movement.

While being a materialist, an atheist and an irreconcilable enemy of religion, Engels nevertheless grasped, like the young Marx, the dual character of the phenomenon: its role in legitimating established order, but also, according to social circumstances, its critical, protesting and even revolutionary role. Furthermore, most of the concrete studies he wrote concerned the rebellious forms of religion.

## Primitive Christianity

First of all he was interested in primitive Christianity, which he defined as the religion of the poor, the banished, the damned, the persecuted and oppressed. The first Christians came from the lowest levels of society: slaves, free people who had been deprived of their rights and small peasants who were crippled by debts.

He even went so far as to draw an astonishing parallel between this primitive Christianity and modern socialism: a) the two great movements are not the creation of leaders and prophets-although prophets are never in short supply in either of them-but are mass movements; b) both are movements of the oppressed, suffering persecution, their members are proscribed and hunted down by the ruling authorities; c) both preach an imminent liberation from slavery and misery.

To embellish his comparison Engels, somewhat provocatively, quoted a saying of the French historian Renan: "If you want to get an idea of what the first Christian communities were like, take a look at a local branch of the International Workingmen's Association" (the multi-national network of working-class organizations formed in 1864, also known as the First International).

According to Engels, the parallel between socialism and early Christianity is present in all movements that dream, throughout the centuries, to restore the primitive Christian religion—from the Taborites of John Zizka and the anabaptists of Thomas Münzer to (after 1830) the French revolutionary communists and the partisans of the German utopian communist Wilhelm Weitling.

There remains, however, in the eyes of Engels, an essential difference between the two movements: the primitive Christians transposed deliverance to the hereafter whereas socialism places it in this world.

## Thomas Münzer

But is this difference as clear-cut as it appears at first sight? In his study of the great peasant wars in Germany it seems to become blurred: Thomas Münzer, the theologian and leader of the revolutionary peasants and heretic (anabaptist) plebeians of the 16th century, wanted the immediate establishment on earth of the Kingdom of God, the millenarian Kingdom of the prophets. According to Engels, the Kingdom of God for Münzer was a society without class differences, private property and state authority independent of, or foreign to, the members of that society. However, Engels was still tempted to reduce religion to a stratagem: he spoke of Münzer's Christian "phraseology" and his biblical "cloak". The specifically religious dimension of Münzerian millenarianism, its spiritual and moral force, its authentically experienced mystical depth, seem to have eluded him.

Engels does not hide his admiration for the German Chiliastic prophet, whose ideas he describes as "quasi-communist" and "religious revolutionary": they were less a synthesis of the plebeian demands from those times than "a brilliant anticipation" of future proletarian emancipatory aims. This anticipatory and utopian dimension of religion—not to be explained in terms of the "reflection theory"—is not further explored by Engels but is intensely and richly worked out (as we shall see later) by Ernst Bloch.

The last revolutionary movement that was waged under the banner of religion was, according to Engels, the English Puritan movement of the 17th century. If religion, and not materialism, furnished the ideology of this revolution, it is because of the politically reactionary nature of this philosophy in England, represented by Hobbes and other partisans of royal absolutism. In contrast to this conservative materialism and deism, the Protestant sects gave to the war against the Stuart royalty its religious banner and its fighters.

This analysis is quite interesting: breaking with the linear vision of history inherited from the Enlightenment, Engels acknowledges that the struggle between materialism and religion does not necessarily correspond to the war between revolution and counter-revolution, progress and regression, liberty and despotism, oppressed and ruling classes. In this precise case, the relation is exactly the opposite one: revolutionary religion against absolutist materialism.

## European Labour Movement

Engels was convinced that since the French Revolution, religion could no more function as a revolutionary ideology, and he was surprised when French and German communists such as Cabot or Weitling would claim that "Christianity

is Communism." He could not predict liberation theology, but, thanks to his analysis of religious phenomena from the viewpoint of class struggle, he brought out the protest potential of religion and opened the way for a new approach-distinct both from Enlightenment philosophy (religion as a clerical conspiracy) and from German neo-Hegelianism (religion as alienated human essence)-to the relationship between religion and society.

Many Marxists in the European labour movement were radically hostile to religion but believed that the atheistic battle against religious ideology must be subordinated to the concrete necessities of the class struggle, which demands unity between workers who believe in God and those who do not. Lenin himself, who very often denounced religion as a "mystical fog", insisted in his article *Socialism and Religion* (1905) that atheism should not be part of the party's programme because "unity in the really revolutionary struggle of the oppressed class for creation of a paradise on earth is more important to us than unity of proletarian opinion on paradise in heaven."

Rosa Luxemburg shared this strategy, but she developed a different and original approach. Although a staunch atheist herself, she attacked in her writings less religion as such than the reactionary policy of the Church in the name of its own tradition. In an essay written in 1905 ("Church and Socialism") she claimed that modern socialists are more faithful to the original principles of Christianity than the conservative clergy of today. Since the socialists struggle for a social order of equality, freedom and fraternity, the priests, if they honestly wanted to implement in the life of humanity the Christian principle "love thy neighbour as thyself", should welcome the socialist movement. When the clergy support the rich, and those who exploit and oppress the poor, they are in explicit contradiction with Christian teachings: they do serve not Christ but the Golden Calf.

The first apostles of Christianity were passionate communists and the Fathers of the Church (like Basil the Great and John Chrysostom) denounced social injustice. Today this cause is taken up by the socialist movement which brings to the poor the Gospel of fraternity and equality, and calls on the people to establish on earth the Kingdom of freedom and neighbour-love. Instead of waging a philosophical battle in the name of materialism, Rosa Luxemburg tried to rescue the social dimension of the Christian tradition for the labour movement.

## Ernst Bloch

Ernst Bloch is the first Marxist author who radically changed the theoretical framework - without abandoning the Marxist and revolutionary perspective. In a similar way to Engels, he distinguished two socially opposed currents: on one side the theocratic religion of the official churches, the opiate of the people, a mystifying apparatus at the service of the powerful; on the other the underground, subversive and heretical religion of the Albigensians, the Hussites, Joachim de Flore, Thomas Münzer, Franz von Baader, Wilhelm Weitling and Leo Tolstoy. However, unlike Engels, Bloch refused to see religion uniquely as a "cloak" of class interests: he explicitly criticized this conception. In its protest and rebellious forms religion is one of the most significant forms of utopian consciousness, one of the richest expressions of the Principle of Hope.

Basing himself on these philosophical presuppositions, Bloch develops a heterodox and iconoclastic interpretation of the Bible-both the Old and the New Testaments-drawing out the *Biblia pauperum* (bible of the poor) which denounces the Pharaohs and calls on each and everyone to choose either Caesar or Christ.

A religious atheist-according to him only an atheist can be a good Christian and vice-versa-and a theologian of the revolution, Bloch not only produced a Marxist reading of millenarianism (following Engels) but also-and this was new-a millenarian interpretation of Marxism, through which the socialist struggle for the Kingdom of Freedom is perceived as the direct heir of the eschatological and collectivist heresies of the past.

Of course Bloch, like the young Marx of the famous 1844 quotation, recognized the dual character of the religious phenomenon, its oppressive aspect as well as its potential for revolt. The first requires the use of what he calls "the cold stream of Marxism": the relentless materialist analysis of ideologies, idols and idolatries. The second one however requires "the warm stream of Marxism," seeking to rescue religion's utopian cultural surplus, its critical and anticipatory force. Beyond any "dialogue," Bloch dreamt of an authentic union between Christianity and revolution, like the one which came into being during the Peasant Wars of the 16th century.

## Frankfurt School

Bloch's views were to a certain extent shared by members of the German radical scholars known as the Frankfurt School. Max Horkheimer considered that "religion is the record of the wishes, nostalgias and indictments of countless generations." Erich Fromm, in his book *The Dogma of Christ* (1930), used Marxism and psychoanalysis to illuminate the Messianic, plebeian, egalitarian and anti-authoritarian essence of primitive Christianity. And the writer Walter Benjamin tried to combine, in a unique and original synthesis, theology and Marxism, Jewish Messianism and historical materialism, class struggle and redemption.

Lucien Goldmann's work *The Hidden God* (1955) is another path-breaking attempt at renewing the Marxist study of religion. Although of a very different inspiration than Bloch, he was also interested in redeeming the moral and human value of religious tradition. The most surprising and original part of his book is the attempt to compare-without assimilating one to another-religious faith and Marxist faith: both have in common the refusal of pure individualism (rationalist or empiricist) and the belief in trans-individual values: God for religion, the human community for socialism.

In both cases the faith is based on a wager - the wager on the existence of God and the Marxist wager on the liberation of humanity-that presupposes risk, the danger of failure and the hope of success. Both imply some fundamental belief which is not demonstrable on the exclusive level of factual judgements.

What separates them is of course the suprahistorical character of religious transcendence: "The Marxist faith is a faith in the historical future that human beings themselves make, or rather that we must make by our activity, a 'wager' in the success of our actions; the transcendence that is the object of this faith is neither supernatural nor transhistorical, but supra-individual, nothing more but also nothing less." Without wanting in any way to "Christianize Marxism" Lucien Goldmann introduced, thanks to the concept of faith, a new way of looking at the conflictual relationship between religious belief and Marxist atheism.

Marx and Engels thought religion's subversive role was a thing of the past, which no longer had any significance in the epoch of modern class struggle. This forecast was more or less historically confirmed for a century - with a few important exceptions (particularly in France): the Christian socialists of the 1930s, the worker priests of the 1940s, the left-wing of the Christian unions in the 1950s, etc.

But to understand what has been happening for the last thirty years in Latin America (and to a lesser extent also in other continents) around the issue of Liberation Theology we need to integrate into our analysis the insights of Bloch and Goldmann on the utopian potential of the Judeo-Christian tradition.

## Oppression of women and religious doctrine

## Marxism and Religion

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What is sorely lacking in these "classical" Marxist discussions on religion is a discussion of the implications of religious doctrines and practices for women. Patriarchy, unequal treatment of women, and the denial of reproductive rights prevail among the main religious denominations - particularly Judaism, Christianity and Islam - and take extremely oppressive forms among fundamentalist currents.

In fact, one of the key criteria for judging the progressive or regressive character of religious movements is their attitude towards women, and particularly on their right to control their own bodies: divorce, contraception, abortion. A renewal of Marxist reflection on religion in the twenty-first century requires us to put the issue of women's rights at the center of the argument.

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