

"Religion is only the illusory sun which revolves round man as long as he does not revolve round himself". Karl Marx.

What exactly is religion?

Before we can look at the Marxist theory of religion we must first have some understanding of what religion is. For many in today's world religion is becoming something alien, only 3% of the population of Britain attend Church! Religion is, however, much more than simple Church attendance, something that has never been high amongst the British working-class. Religion for me involves two things: beliefs and practices, or, rituals. Roland Robertson defines religion in the following succinct manner:

"(religion) refers to the existence of supernatural beings that have a governing effect on life"

This is as clear a definition of religion as I have come across. Religion refers to the existence of beings that transcend nature, that is, they do not conform to the laws of nature. These supernatural beings are superhuman, they can perform tasks that no creature on earth could possibly perform. This definition of religion may, however, lead to some religions not being defined as religions. No definition is perfect.

Religion also involves practices or rituals. What is a ritual? For me it is simply some repeated pattern of human action which has some religious significance or connection. For example, marriage ceremonies in churches, baptism, prayer, confession, confirmation are all rituals. Such rituals can be conceived of in ideological terms, or in terms of control. They are symbolic in nature often expressing ideas of power lying outside of humanity, in God or supernatural beings. They are also forms of control because once enveloped in the ritual it is difficult to go against the ritual. How do you object? The only thing to do is not to go to the ritual. Imagine getting up in the middle of one of the Ministers prayers and stating your objections, you would either be ignored or thrown from the place of worship. Rituals are sacred, not to be interrupted or questioned.

What I'm concerned with here is less the ritual aspect of religion as the beliefs that form religions and the religious hierarchies that hold a measure of power, in some societies more than others, vis-à-vis the State and civil society in general.

What did Marx and Engels think of religion?

Marx had as much time for religion as the religious had for Marxism. For Marx religion is an illusion, a creation of humanity. God did not create humanity: humanity creates its Gods. The phenomenon of religion is part of what Marx refers to as alienation. Alienation is a situation in which the creations of humanity appear alien, that is, we do not recognise our own hand in their creation and assign to them powers that only we ourselves possess or could possess if only we did not assign them to superhuman beings that do not exist.

Marx was very much influenced by the work of philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach. According to Feuerbach God was merely a projection of humanity's attributes, desires and potentialities. Once men realised this they would appropriate these attributes for themselves.

While Marx was very much influenced by Feuerbach his theory of religion goes beyond that of Feuerbach. He agrees that religion is indeed a creation of humanity, what else could it be? As Feuerbach puts it: "...Thought arises from being - being does not arise from thought." Even religious beliefs, and "sacred texts", require humanity to have existed, and more importantly, formulated the ideas that form any given religion. This is called "materialism" as opposed to "idealism". Religion is the purest expression of idealism although Christians would deny this. Marx, however, believed that the existence and continued presence of religion in the world is to be found in the conditions of this world. He writes:

"The foundation of irreligious criticism is this: man makes religion, religion does not make man. But man is no abstract being squatting outside the world...This state, this society, produces religions inverted attitude to the world, because they are an inverted world themselves. Thus the struggle against religion is indirectly the struggle against that world whose spiritual aroma is religion...Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the feeling of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless circumstances. It is the opium of the people..."

This sounds rather complicated and opaque but basically what he means is that the conditions of this world creates and sustains the beliefs that the religious hold with regard to the next world. It is capitalism, and before that all the other exploitative systems of production, which have given birth to religions. Religion is the opium of the people, that is, it acts as a kind of pain killer. Religion makes bearable the unbearable, such as: poverty, hunger, inequality and repression. The source of religion is not to be found in the religious mind, some scholars claimed that such a mind was illogical, but in the material world. To banish religion from the world required the banishment of the conditions that give birth to religion in the first place.

Engels agreed with Marx's view of religion, although his later writings qualified this position somewhat, he writes:

"Christianity was originally a movement of oppressed people; it first appeared as the religion of slaves and emancipated slaves, of poor people deprived of all rights, or peoples subjugated or dispersed by Rome."

Christianity thus evolved out of a particular epoch in time, under given conditions. Christianity was originally the religion of the oppressed, the slave and former slave. Yet in time Christianity came to be the religion of the dominant class, the feudal landlords, the capitalist class. Over time the beliefs came to be shaped so as to accord with the interests of the ruling-class. Nevertheless, religion arose in conditions that would seem to prove the Marxist theory of religion correct.

Weber has an argument with the ghost of Marx

The Ghost Wins!

Max Weber was a German sociologist. He was not a Marxist but much of what he wrote was influenced by Marx. The reason why I am going to outline his theory and the Marxist evidence against it is that it will better demonstrate the Marxist position with regard to religion. Sometimes a contrast better illuminates the subject better than any bright light. After all what is wrong without right, left without right, truth without falsehood?

The work we are most concerned with in the present context is probably Weber's most influential: "The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism". Weber argued that he wished to reject the one-sidedness of Marxist analysis. He believed that they concentrated too much upon the economic. Weber believed that change was multifactorial, that is, it had many causes. New ideas, charismatic leaders and inventions could shape history and lead to great change. In the "Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism" Weber sets out to show that a particular form of Christian religion called Calvinism played a decisive role in the establishment of capitalism.

His argument is quite complicated but is broadly as follows:

Calvinists believed in predestination, that is, they believed that from the moment you were born your fate was decided. You would either go to Heaven or to Hell and nothing you could do upon this earth would change this. This left Calvinists in something of a state, how

could they know if they were the chosen few, those who would go to heaven. They reasoned that if they were successful in this life then that was a sign that they would go to heaven, after all, God would hardly let those doomed to Hell prosper. This reasoning coupled with the asceticism of Calvinists led to the success of capitalism. Capitalism requires that capital constantly be reinvested and reinvested. If the capitalist simply withdraws their capital after making a certain sum of money, and enjoys it, then capitalism would collapse as an economic system. Calvinists had the motivation to keep investing capital, they wanted to be successful, as well as the asceticism to make it possible. Religion in a way helped to produce capitalism.

This is the very opposite to a Marxist analysis of capitalism and its evolution. It was not Calvinism, argued the Marxist Kautsky, that came before capitalism but capitalism that preceded Calvinism. Calvinism was taken up by many capitalists because it suited their interests. Calvinism fitted best with capitalism, and so it became the ideology that capitalists used to justify their system, not just to the working-class but also to themselves. The first forms of capital, such as merchant capital, come on the stage of world history long before Calvinism does. Capitalism preceded Calvinism therefore how could it have brought about, or helped to foster, capitalism?

What is the essential difference between the two explanations for why capitalism emerged. It is in my opinion a difference of emphasis. Marxists emphasize the changes in the economic base of society, that is, changes in the forces of production and class conflict, which is the dynamo of history, while Weber concentrated more upon the realm of beliefs. That is not to say that Weber discounted such things as technology etc. To put it simply, Weber gives an analysis closer to idealism while Marxists give one grounded in materialism. Being determines consciousness, consciousness does not determine being.

How does religion function to preserve the status quo?

For Marx, and later Marxists, religion is part of the dominant ideology of any society. It is an essential part of the beliefs and values which predominate within a given society and which function to ensure the status quo. Religion is thus, as part of the dominant ideology, a distortion or masking of reality. Religion helps to preserve the existing social order by making life more bearable, and by justifying exploitation and the class system that results from the capitalist mode of production.

The Way, the Truth, the Light...
Now lets hear what the Marxists say

Some religions promise supernatural intervention in order to solve the problems of the world. Super-human beings will come down from Heaven, or some other mythical place, and change the world for the better. All crime, poverty, war, famine and all those other undesirable things (whatever they might be) will be banished. A good example of such a religion is provided by the Jehovah Witnesses who believe that Jehovah will descend from heaven and bring about heaven on earth. Thus, while they are more in touch than most Christians to the social problems that beset society they are no more in touch with how such things could be changed.

The Christian religion promises a paradise, but unlike the Jehovah Witnesses it only comes about when you die. This paradise is not on this world but in Heaven. Only those who are true believers, and obey the 10 commandments can get to heaven. In heaven there are no classes, no inequalities, no hunger or poverty. The Bible even hints that poor people will be given preference over the rich. What point changing this world when such a paradise awaits us all?

Another way in which religion functions to preserve the class system is through direct and indirect justification of the class system. During feudal times, when the ruling class was the landed nobility, the church often acted as an apologist and cheerleader for the landed nobility. The church was in turn often rewarded with generous donations from the very same noble lords.

Indeed if we believe that everything is a creation of God then God must have intended for some people to be rich and powerful while others are poor and powerless. Religion creates an attitude of fatality to what happens in this world. Whether or not a single religious leader ever muttered a word about social conditions or socialism this attitude of fatality and impotence would remain. This could be called a latent function of religion, not obvious nor intentional.

Some religious communities even make a virtue out of acceptance of suffering. Those who bear their poverty, degradation and miserable existence with dignity are doing the right thing. Such people are behaving how God, or the divine being, meant them to behave. After all didnt Jesus die on the cross, did not God give up his only Son, so why should people not accept their sufferings. This attitude is still to be found amongst many of the religious. It used to be very common, for example, you had Nuns and Monks going without food and sticking nails in their hands and doing various other painful things to themselves. What exactly this had to do with

Christianity I'm not sure but some of them were even made Saints for such masochism.

Not all Marxists Agree
(What's new!)

Not all Marxists agree that religion is universally a bulwark against social change, a conservative force in society. Indeed, Engels in his later writings comes round to the point of view that religion can sometimes be a challenge to the existing social order. Engels even goes so far as to compare early Christian sects with early socialist movements.

Otto Maduro, who is what might be called a Neo-Marxist, believes that religion has relative autonomy. Religion has some independence from the economic base and is not just simply a conservative force. Religion can in some cases be revolutionary.

He cites the example of the Catholic Church in Latin America. The Catholic Church at one time give unqualified support to the capitalist class and to the various military dictatorships that have existed in this turbulent region. The Church while admitting some social problems denies that there is an exploitative or oppressive relationship between classes. However, increasingly Catholic Priests have demonstrated autonomy by criticizing the capitalist class, sometimes they even act against their interests. Maduro argues that when the oppressed class has no outlet for its grievances it will pressure the church with the result that the Clerical class can become radicalised in their defence. New interpretations are given to the Bible and so a religion that is critical of the rich can develop. This is also known as liberation theology.

The Role of the Religious in the Modern World
(Personal Observations)

The influence of religion is very much on the decline in Western capitalist societies. The power of religious organisations vis-à-vis the state and society in general is very much in decline. Also, religious activity is also fading from the realm of social life. For example, it is now thought that only 3% of mainland Britons actually attend church! Yet, in other societies religion is still very much present, such as Northern Ireland for example where Church attendance is as high as 70% in some areas. Religion is also still quite prevalent in many Third World countries as well.

It is probably true that religion, at least with regard to Western capitalist societies, performs much less the function of justifying the existing order. That is, the religious (Priests, Ministers etc.) rarely actually speak of the social order and how things should be. For example, you will rarely hear a Minister or Priest sing the praises of a free market economy, at least not from the pulpit. However, there are some exceptions to this, such as in Brazil. In the shanty towns Pentecostalism is a growing religion (further evidence to support Marxist theory) whose Ministers tell their poverty stricken flock that it is their Sins, not the workings of capitalism or underdevelopment, that are the cause of their poverty. This is plain and simple ideological control, a justification for the system.

Many would argue that the religious do not get involved in politics, they are above politics. Again, the evidence would suggest otherwise. Perhaps the best example of this was the stance of the Catholic Church during the Second World War. If you were found to be a member of the Communist party you were excommunicated, if you were a member of the Nazi party then that was okay. The Pope actually, more or less, gave his support to the project of the Nazis. After the war ended the hierarchy of the Church helped to spirit former Nazis, some of whom administered the death camps, to freedom. They give them false passports and new identities (allegedly), helping them to hide in other countries far from justice. What does this suggest as to the political allegiance, and ideological disposition of the Catholic Church at the time?

Similarly, when the fascist regime of Mussolini had been overthrown and democracy established it appeared as if a Communist government might be elected. What did the Church do, did they remain neutral? No. They swung their full weight of support against the Communist party of Italy.

In America there is also evidence to support the Marxist view of religion with regard to the role of the New-Christian-Right. The religious right, conservative Protestants, consistently support ultra-conservative members of the Republican party. They also target liberal candidates who are too liberal, that is, those who do not hold the same views as themselves. They have been quite successful in stopping many of these candidates getting elected.

Pat Robertson would be seen as part of the New Christian Right, he would speak on its behalf or at least reflect their beliefs and values. The Christian right appears to support less government interference in business, aggressive anti-communism, less welfare spending and more spending on the military. It was the New Christian Right that helped Ronald Reagan to election success.

In Northern Ireland a similar situation exists with regard to the religious Right. In Northern Ireland politics and religion not only mix, it is thought by most that they should mix. A politician who does not worship God in Northern Ireland just is not a politician. One political party in particular (I'm not going to mention its name) is headed by a man who not only is head of a political party but also of a religious movement. This political party, membership of which implicitly requires you to be a member also of the religion attached, is strongly conservative, extremely right-wing and anti-socialist. Their leader frequently denounces his opponents as Communists, even the Pope is a closet Red! This party is not just a small fringe party of fanatics but one of the biggest parties in Northern Ireland receiving substantial electoral support.

Many Churches are also increasingly becoming involved in big business, that is, they are now investing their money in capitalist enterprise. Particularly popular, in Britain and Northern Ireland at least, is the investment of money in the armament industry by certain Churches. Some Churches see no contradiction between Christianity and funding the creation of weapons of mass destruction. Churches are thus in a very real sense becoming capitalist in every sense of the word. They too now have interests in common with the capitalist class, after all, they too have their money profitably invested. What does this suggest as to the likely ideological disposition of those who form the hierarchies of these organisations? Being prepared to invest money in industry is one thing but investing in the production of weapons demonstrates a cold hearted business acumen.

Did Jesus not tell his disciples to cast off their worldly possessions, and not to think of tomorrow?

Conclusion

While it may indeed be true that religion and religious movements have challenged the status quo at given times it remains the case that throughout the history of religion the vast majority of religious organisations and beliefs have served the interests of the ruling-class. Even those religions and religious movements that have at one time challenged the status quo have been turned over the course of time into a tool of the powerful, that is, into ruling class ideology. The Marxist case with regard to religion is very comprehensive, even if we accept that in some cases religion can be a force for change. Certainly no other theory explains religion in so comprehensive and compelling a manner.