

# *In Defense of Marxism:* *Marxism and Religion*

*We have received quite a few e-mails asking about the attitude of Marxists to religion, relating not only to Marxism and Christianity, but also to Islam. For example, we have received several communications from sympathetic people who support liberation theology, in the Philippines. We are also in contact with groups who describe themselves as Islamic Marxists. This is clearly an interesting and important question, which deserves serious treatment. As an initial contribution, we are publishing an article by Alan Woods which is actually based on his replies to such letters.*

## **What Marxists Want**

The aim of Marxists is to fight for the socialist transformation of society on a national and international scale. We believe that the capitalist system has long ago outlived its historical usefulness and has converted itself into a monstrously oppressive, unjust and inhuman system. The ending of exploitation and the creation of a harmonious socialist world order, based on a rational and democratically run plan of production, will be the first step in the creation of a new and higher form of society in which men and women will relate to themselves as human beings.

We believe that it is the duty of any humane person to support the fight against such a system which involves untold misery, disease, oppression and death for millions of people in the world. We wholeheartedly welcome the participation in the struggle of every progressive person, irrespective of nationality, the color of their skin, or their religious beliefs. We also welcome the opportunity of a dialogue between Marxists and Christians, Muslims and other groups.

However, in order to fight effectively, it is necessary to work out a serious programme, policy and perspective that can guarantee success. We believe that only Marxism (scientific socialism) provides such a perspective.

The question of religion is a complex one, and can be approached from a number of different standpoints: historical, philosophical, political, etc. Marxism began as a philosophy: dialectical materialism. A very good explanation of this philosophy can be found in works such as Engels' *Anti-During* and *Ludwig Feuerbach. Reason*

*in Revolt, Marxist philosophy and modern science* provides a comprehensive modern account of the same ideas. This is the starting-point for a clarification of the philosophical position of Marxism on religion.

## **Philosophical Materialism and Science**

Marxists stand on the basis of philosophical materialism, which rules out the existence of any supernatural entity, or anything outside or "above" nature. There is, in fact, no need for any such explanation for life and the universe - least of all today. Nature furnishes its own explanations and it furnishes them in great abundance.

Science has proven that humankind has developed - like every other species - over millions of years, and that life itself has evolved from inorganic matter. There cannot be a brain without a central nervous system, and there cannot be a central nervous system without a material body, blood, bones, muscles etc. In turn, the body must be sustained by food derived from a material environment. The most recent discoveries of genetics in the human genome project have furnished incontrovertible evidence for the materialist standpoint.

The revelation of the genome's long and complex history, so long hidden from view, has prompted discussions about the nature of humankind and the process of creation. Incredibly, in the first decade of the twenty first century, the ideas of Darwin are being challenged by the so-called Creationist movement in the USA, which wants American schoolchildren to be taught that God created the world in six days, that man was created from dust and that the first woman was made out of one of his ribs.

The latest discoveries have finally exploded the nonsense of Creationism. It has comprehensively demolished the notion that every species was created separately, and that Man, with his eternal soul, was especially created to sing the praises of the Lord. It is now clearly proved that humans are not at all unique creations. The results of the human genome project show conclusively that we share our genes with other species - that ancient genes helped to make us who we are. Humans share their genes with other species going far back into the mists of time. In fact, a small part of this common genetic inheritance can be traced back to primitive organisms

such as bacteria. In many cases, humans have exactly the same genes as rats, mice, cats, dogs and even fruit flies. Indeed, scientists have now found some 200 genes that humans share with bacteria. In this way, the final proof of evolution has been established. In a fundamental way. No divine intervention is required.

## **Life After Death?**

So, in spite of all this scientific development, why does Religion still have a grip on the minds of millions? Religion offers men and women the consolation of a life after death. Philosophical materialism denies the possibility of such a thing. Mind, ideas, the soul - all these things are the product of matter organized in a certain way. Organic life arises from inorganic life at a certain stage, and likewise, simple forms of life - bacteria, single celled organisms etc. - evolve into more complex forms involving a backbone, a central nervous system and a brain.

The desire to live forever is at least as old as civilization - probably still older. There is something in our being that resists the idea that "I" must some day cease to be. And indeed, to give up forever this wonderful world of sunshine and flowers, the wind in my face, the sound of the water, the company of my loved ones - to enter an endless realm of nothingness - is hard to take or even to comprehend. Thus, early on, humans have sought an imaginary communion with a non-material spirit world where - it is believed - a part of me will live on. This was indeed one of the most powerful and enduring messages of Christianity: "I can live after death"

The problem is that the life that is led by most men and women in present-day society is so hard, so intolerable, or at least so meaningless, that the idea of a life after death seems the only way to invest it with any meaning. We will come back to this most important question later. But in the meantime, let us analyze the precise meaning of the idea of life after death. And the instant it is subjected to a serious analysis, it crumbles to dust.

The problem was understood long ago, among others by the Greek neo-Platonist philosopher, Plotinus, who said of immortality: "It is unspeakable, for if you say anything of it you make it a particular." The same idea is to be found in Indian writing on the soul: "The self is to be described by

No, No, (neti, neti). He is incomprehensible, for He cannot be comprehended.” (See A.C. Bouquet, *Comparative Religion*, p. 162). Thus, for the philosophers and theologians, the soul is just a “night in which all cows are black” as Hegel would have said. And yet, in everyday life, people with no education at all speak with confidence on the subject of the soul and life after death. They imagine it is just like waking up after a sleep and being blissfully united with long-lost loved ones, and to live happily ever after.

The soul is supposed to be immaterial. But what is life without matter? The destruction of the physical body means the end of life of the individual being. True, the trillions of individual atoms that make up our body do not disappear, but reappear in different combinations. In that sense we are all immortal, because matter can neither be created nor destroyed. Admittedly, there are spiritualists who insist that they hear voices although no physical being is present. The answer to this is quite simple: if there is a voice, there must be *vocal chords* - or else we do not know what a voice is! Try as you will, you cannot separate a single one of the manifestations of our *human life activity* from the material body.

The common idea of “life after death” is more or less a continuation of the life we have led on earth (since we can know no other). After the soul has fled the body, it apparently “wakes up” in a beautiful land where we are miraculously united with our loved ones, to a life of eternal joy in which sickness and old age are banished. It is sufficient to pose the question concretely to see that this is impossible. If we consider all the things that make life worth living: eating good food, drinking fine wines (or, for the English, a good strong cup of tea), singing, dancing, embracing, making love etc., it will be immediately evident that all these activities are inseparably connected with the body and its physical attributes. More cerebral pastimes like talking, reading, writing and thinking are equally bound up with our bodily organs. The same is true of breathing, or any other of the activities which, in their totality, we call *life*.

As a matter of fact, an existence from which all pain and suffering were absent would be intolerable for human beings. A world in which everything was white would actually be the same as a world in which everything was black. From a strictly medical point of view, pain has an important function. It is not just an evil, but a warning from the body that all is not well. Pain is part of the human condition. Not only that: pain and pleasure are dialectically related. *Without the*

*existence of pain, pleasure could not exist.* Don Quixote explained to Sancho Panza that the best sauce was hunger. Likewise, we rest far better after a period of vigorous exertion.

*In the same way, death is an integral part of life.* Life is not conceivable without death. We begin to die the moment we are born, for in fact, it is only the death of trillions of cells and their replacement by trillions of new cells, that constitutes life and human development. Without death there could be no life, no growth, no change, no development. Thus, the attempt to banish death from life - as if the two things could be separated - is to arrive at a state of absolute immutability, changeless, static equilibrium. But this is just another name for - death. For there can be no life without change and movement.

But what harm is there in believing in another life? Not a lot, it might seem. And yet, is it not undesirable to miseducate men and women, and encourage them to construct their lives around an illusion? To the degree that we put behind us all illusions and see the world as it really is, and ourselves as we really are, we can acquire the necessary knowledge to change the world and ourselves.

What we are as individual personalities is intimately bound up with our material bodies and has no existence separate and apart from these. We are born, we live and we die, just like all other living organisms in the universe. Each generation must live its life and then make way for the new generations which are destined to take our place. The aspiration to immortality, the imagined right to live forever, is at bottom egotistical and unrealistic. Rather than waste time striving for a non-existent “other world”, it is necessary to strive to make this world a fit place to live in. Because for the great majority of men and women who are born into this world, the question is not whether there is a life after death, but rather is there a life before death?

The knowledge that this life is fleeting, that we and our loved ones will not always be here, far from being a cause for dismay, should inspire us with a passionate love of life, and a burning desire to make it better for all. We know that every flower is born only to wither, and in some sense the transience of the bloom lends it a tragic beauty. But we also know that nature blossoms afresh each spring, and that the eternal cycle of birth and death that is the essence of every living thing is what gives life its bittersweet flavour, that comedy and tragedy, laughter and tears are what makes life the rich mosaic of human sensations that it is. This is our inescapable destiny as human beings. For we are humans, not gods, and

must embrace our human condition. We have the disadvantage over the gods that we are mortal. But we also have the great advantage over them that we actually exist in flesh and blood, whereas they are mere disembodied figments of the imagination.

### **Pessimistic Conclusion?**

Materialism as a philosophy has a long and honourable history. The early Greek Ionian philosophers were all materialists. According to Plato, Anaxagoras, one of the most remarkable of them, and the tutor of Pericles, was accused of atheism. Protagoras (c.415 BC) says with the usual irony of a sophist: “In the matter of the gods I have not been able to attain the knowledge of their existence or non-existence, or what form they are; for many things hinder the attainment of this knowledge, both for the obscurity of the subject and the shortness of human life.” (quoted in A.C. Bouquet, *Comparative Religion*, pp. 105-6). Diagoras, a contemporary, went far further. When someone directed his attention to the votive tablets in a temple, erected by the grateful survivors of a shipwreck, he replied: “Those who were drowned did not put up tablets.”

Does the materialist understanding signify a pessimistic or nihilistic view of life? On the contrary. The first condition for a full and satisfying life on earth is that we adopt a truthful view of things. One of the most sublime and humane views of life that has ever been expounded is the philosophy of Epicurus - that genius of antiquity who, together with Democritus and Leucippus, discovered that the world was composed of atoms. Epicurus (341-270 BC), whose memory has been slandered for centuries by the Church, wished to free mankind from the torment of fear, and particularly from fear of death. His was a cheerful and optimistic view of life. On the day of his own death, he was said to have remarked: “It is a good day to die”.

The Stoics, who preached a kind of universal brotherhood in which all would be members of one great Commonwealth, believed that, since the universe is indestructible, the souls of all men survive death, but not as individuals. But since nothing can happen to us but what is in the course and constitution of nature, death is not to be feared. It was a Stoic who first said that “all men are free”. Stoicism had a big influence on Christianity, through the writings of Epectetus and Marcus Aurelius. Yet the Stoics did not really believe in god at all (they used the word *theos*, but in an entirely different sense to the Christian God), and affirmed that the wise man was equal to Zeus.

Their idea was not to go to heaven, but to live a good life, which they identified with *apatheia*, by which is meant not apathy, but the control of the emotions.

Actually, most of the peoples of antiquity seemed to have been remarkably indifferent to the question of what would happen to them after death. The "life" after death of the Greeks was a particularly uninviting place, a grey, cheerless world of gibbering spirits. The Egyptians had a more inviting view of the afterworld, in which there would be food and wine, music, naked dancing girls, and in which one's every need would be catered for by an army of slaves. But then, for the Egyptians, the afterworld was the monopoly of the ruling class, whose monumental tombs display the same ostentatious wealth and luxury they had enjoyed in the flesh. In fact, in China and all other early class societies, the prospect of a life after death was reserved for the aristocracy, the chief, the king, the warrior. It was just another privilege enjoyed by the ruling elite, or rather, just a continuation after death of the privileges they enjoyed during life - privileges from which the masses were rigorously excluded.

With Christianity, heaven is finally democratized - all are admitted - but only at a price. That price is, more or less, to sacrifice one's life in this world in expectation of better things to come. True, the rich of this world are threatened with dire punishment for their sins. This may have worried some. But in general, the ruling class look with surprising equanimity at the possibility of future hell-fire, preferring to dedicate themselves to the tranquil enjoyment of their riches and the good things in life, while leaving the future to take care of itself. For the poor, however, the passive acceptance of a world of pain and suffering in this valley of tears is the price of the promise of future bliss beyond the tomb. This promise has led countless millions of men and women to oblivion, having exhausted themselves in a life of unending toil and physical and mental anguish.

To some people, this may seem just. But to us, it seems more like barefaced deceit and robbery. "Take this hope away from the common people, and what would they have left?" So goes the argument of the well-fed sophist. The answer is: they would have the truth, and the Bible tells us that the truth shall make us free. So long as the eyes of men and women are directed heavenwards, they will be unable to fix their gaze on the real problems that torment them and on their real enemies. They will exchange the prospect of real happiness and the fulfilment of their

human potential for the false prospect of a non-existent life after death. That is, they will have sacrificed themselves as human beings, just as surely as the sacrificial victims of the bloodthirsty old religions of the remote past. Real lives are destroyed for the sake of an illusion.

The love of life that is the true hallmark of philosophical materialism must entail a passionate desire to change the world we live in and improve the lives of our fellow men and women. Where religion teaches us to lift our eyes to the heavens, Marxism tells us to fight for a better life on earth. Marxists believe that men and women should fight to transform their lives and to create a genuinely human society which would permit the human race to lift itself up to its true stature. We believe that men and women have only one life, and should dedicate themselves to making this life beautiful and self-fulfilling. If you like, we are fighting for a paradise in this life, because we know there is no other. To the degree that we live and fight for a world fit to live in, we are preparing a better future for our children and grandchildren. And although every individual has a finite life-span, the human race continues, and our individual contribution to the cause of humanity can also live on after we have ceased to be. We can attain immortality, not by denying the laws of nature, but in the memory of future generations - the only immortality to which mortals have any right to aspire.

There is therefore a profound philosophical difference between Marxism and all forms of religion. Does this mean that we cannot agree to fight and work together for a better world? Not at all. Everyone is perfectly entitled to hold whatever views they wish concerning the fate that awaits us after we "give up the ghost". But this difference of opinion - important as it is from a philosophical point of view - should in no way prevent us from uniting in the struggle against earthly oppression and injustice. It is only a question of reaching agreement on the basic programme of the socialist transformation of society and the means whereby this can be put into practice. We will have time enough to discuss the other matters!

The world of religion is a mystified world, a distorted impression of reality. But, like all ideas, these ideas have their origin in the real world. Moreover, they are an expression of the contradictions of class society. This fact is very clear in the most ancient religions. The Babylonian god Marduk announced his intention of creating man for the service of the gods, "to free

them" - that is, to perform the menial tasks associated with temple ritual and to provide food for the gods. Here we find a reflection in religion of the reality of class society, where humanity is divided into two classes; the untouchable gods on high (the ruling class) and the "hewers of wood and drawers of water (the labouring classes). Its purpose was to provide an ideological (religious) justification for the enslavement of the majority by the minority. And this was a very real fact of life in all ancient (and modern) societies: that the priest caste was freed from the need to work, and in fact enjoyed very real privileges as the physical representatives of god on earth.

Writing about Babylonian creation myths (from which the first book of Genesis is derived), S.H. Hooke observes: "We have already seen that the myth of Lahar and Ashnan ended up with the creation of man for the service of the gods. Another myth [...] describes the way in which man was created. Although the Sumerian myth differs considerably from the account given in the Babylonian Epic of Creation, both versions agree in the object for which man was created, namely, for the service of the gods, to till the ground and free the gods from having to work for their living." (S.H. Hooke, *Middle Eastern Mythology*, p. 29.)

Thus religion in the proper sense (as opposed to magic, totemism and animism of earlier, classless societies) arises out of the division of society into antagonistic classes, and is an expression of the insoluble contradictions that flow from this. In the earliest period, a dim memory of an earlier time when all were equal remained alive. It surfaces in mythology in the idea of the "golden age", and it appears in the Bible in the form of the Garden of Eden. These ideas express a sense of loss and a longing after a lost world of bliss. Religion seeks to overcome this contradiction, to soften its sting, to reconcile men and women to the reality of suffering and exploitation by presenting it as the will of God, or the result of man's failure to obey God, or both. Submit! Obey! Sacrifice! Then all will be well. *In fact, the violent sundering of humanity from itself - this alienation of the human race which can only be overcome by the abolition of class society and the re-establishment of really human bonds between people.*

This psychological relationship between human beings and the deities which they create for themselves tells us a great deal about the real condition of the human race. It is no secret that the deities of a given society are merely a reflection of that society, its mode of production, social relations, morality

and prejudices. As we pointed out in *Reason in Revolt*: "It was not god who created man after his own image, but, on the contrary, men and women who created gods in their own image and likeness. Ludwig Feuerbach said that if birds had a religion, their God would have wings. 'Religion is a dream, in which our own conceptions and emotions appear to us as separate existences, beings out of ourselves. The religious mind does not distinguish between subjective and objective - it has no doubts; it has the faculty, not of discerning other things than itself, but of seeing its own conceptions out of itself as distinct beings.' This was already understood by men like Xenophanes of Colophon (565-c.470 B.C.), who wrote 'Homer and Hesiod have ascribed to the gods every deed that is shameful and dishonorable among men: stealing and adultery and deceiving each other...The Ethiopians make their gods black and snub-nosed, and the Thracians theirs grey-eyed and red-haired... If animals could paint and make things, like men, horses and oxen too would fashion the gods in their own image'."

But these gods are not merely carbon copies of reality, but reality seen through the spectacles of religion - an alienated, mystical, topsy-turvy world where everything is stood on its head. They are everything that man would like to be but is not. They possess all those attributes which humans would like to possess and aspire to, but inevitably fall short of. In that sense, religion represents a yearning after the unattainable. But this religious feeling also contains another element: a deep yearning after a better world and a better life. When the hungry and oppressed peasant cries out for his god, he is crying out for justice, and hence against the injustice, cruelty and inhumanity of this world.

This belief in equality and the communion of believers is frequently expressed in the form of primitive communism, as with the early Christians, about which we have spoken. The mass movements that were aroused by these beliefs in the early period of both Islam and Christianity shook the world. But, in the absence of the necessary development of the means of production, humanity was compelled to toil and suffer for another two thousand years under class slavery. The dream of equality and brotherhood was shattered. Behind the landlord - and later the capitalist - stood not just the earthly monarch with his soldiers, policemen and gaolers, but also the spiritual policemen and gaolers. Resistance to the status quo was punishable not only by fire and sword, but also by

excommunication and eternal torment. Despairing of all possibility of obtaining justice in the real world of men, he resigns himself to the thought that justice may be found - on the other side of the tomb.

We speak here of men, because for the great majority of written history, society has been dominated by men, and women have been reduced to the role of the slaves of slaves. Thus, man must be the servant of his lord, his king and his God, and woman must be the servant of her husband - her lord and master. For many women, the consolation of religion was the only way to relieve the intense suffering that arises from their slavery. This explains why in so many societies women are so attached to religion. Without it, their lives would be utterly intolerable. It is like a drug that numbs the senses and renders them impervious to pain. But it does not remove the cause of the pain or improve the lot of women. On the contrary. Although in its beginnings, Christianity offered new hope to women, and was contemptuously described by its Roman enemies as a "religion of slaves and women", in practice it is marked by an intense misogyny. Man's original sin was said to have been caused by a woman, Eve.

The most natural relations between men and women have been suppressed and cursed as mortal sin. St. Augustine described the sexual act as a "mass of perdition". The proper place for woman is to suffer in the service of man, a situation graphically conveyed by the sorrowful Virgin. No happiness is to be expected on this earth.

Generations of religion have set the seal on the unhappy lot of women. And what is true for Christianity is as true or even more true of other religions. There is an old Jewish prayer: "Blessed art thou, O Lord, who has not made me a woman". Under certain Moslem countries the oppression of women has taken on an extreme form - as in Iran, and still worse, Afghanistan. In India Hindu tradition has for centuries condemned widows to immolate themselves on the funeral pyres of their husbands. *The emancipation of women from age-old slavery is thus in direct contradiction to religion.*

In most of the great world religions, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Sikhism - at least in their origins - there is an element of criticism of the world and all its works, combined with a dream of a better world, in which there will be no rich or poor, no oppressors or oppressed, in which all men and women will be brothers and sisters. In both Christian churches and Islamic mosques, the illusion is maintained of the "communion" or brotherhood of all believers, that all are

"equal in the sight of God" and so on. But the following day, the rich Christian or Islamic boss returns to exploiting, robbing, insulting and cheating his worker fellow-believers the same as before. When this flagrant contradiction between the theory and practice of religion is pointed out, they will shake their heads sadly and mumble about the imperfection of human beings in this sinful world, which is very little consolation for the worker.

## Origins of Christianity

The role of religion in society has changed many times over the centuries and millennia. It is important that we understand the origin and historical evolution of the great religions. Originally both Christianity and Islam were revolutionary movements of the poor and oppressed. Let us take Christianity. About 2000 years ago the early Christians organized a mass movement of the poorest and most downtrodden sections of society. It is not an accident that the Romans accused the Christians of being a "movement of slaves and women". As Engels wrote: "The history of early Christianity has notable points of resemblance with the modern working class movement...Both are persecuted and baited, their adherents are despised and made the object of exclusive laws, the former as enemies of the human race, the latter as enemies of the state, enemies of religion, the family, social order. And in spite of all persecution, nay, even spurred on by it, they forge victoriously ahead." (Marx and Engels, *On Religion*, p. 281.)

That the early Christians were also communists immediately becomes clear from a reading of the Acts of the Apostles. Christ himself moved among the poor and dispossessed and frequently attacked the rich. It is not an accident that his first act on entering Jerusalem was to drive the money changers out of the Temple. He also said that it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than a rich man to enter the Kingdom of God. (Luke, 18:24). The early Christians were on the side of the poor and took their part against the rich and powerful.

In the epistle of James we read: "Go now, ye rich men, weep and howl for your miseries that shall come upon you. Your riches are corrupted, and your garments are moth-eaten. Your gold and silver is cankered: and the rust of them shall be a witness against you, and shall eat your flesh as it were fire. Ye have heaped treasure together for the last days. Behold, the hire of the labourers who have reaped down your fields, which is of you kept back by fraud, crieth; and the cries of them which have reaped are entered into

the ears of the Lord of sabaoth. Ye have lived in pleasure on the earth, and been wanton. Ye have nourished your hearts as in a day of slaughter. Ye have condemned and killed the just; and he doth not resist you. Be present, therefore, brethren, unto the coming of the Lord.” (James, 5:1) This is the voice of class struggle, with no “ifs” and “buts”. There are many such expressions in the Bible.

The communism of the early Christians is also shown by the fact that in their communities all wealth was held in common. Anyone who wished to join had first to give up all his or her worldly goods. In the Acts of the Apostles we read: “And they continued steadfastly in the Apostles’ doctrine and fellowship [“*koinonia*”, that is to say, *communism*], and in the breaking of bread, and in prayers.....And all that believed were together, And had all things common; And sold their possessions and goods and parted them to all men, as every man had need.” (Acts, 2:42)

And again: “And the multitude of them that believed were of one heart and of one soul: neither said any of them that ought of the things which he possessed was his own; but they had all things in common.....Neither was there any among them that lacked: for as many as were possessors of lands or houses sold them, And laid them down at the apostles’ feet, and distribution was made unto every man according as he had need.” (Acts, 4:32)

Of course, this communism had a somewhat naive and primitive character. This is no reflection on the men and women of that time, who were very courageous people who were not afraid to sacrifice their lives in the struggle against the monstrous Roman slave state. But the real achievement of communism (that is, a classless society) was impossible at that time because the material conditions for it were absent. Marx and Engels for the first time gave communism a scientific character. They explained that the real emancipation of the masses depends on the level of development of the productive forces (industry, agriculture, science and technology) which will create the necessary conditions for a general reduction of the working day and access to culture for all, as the only way of transforming the way people think and behave towards each other.

The material conditions at the time of early Christianity were not sufficiently advanced to permit such a development, and therefore the communism of the early Christians remained on a primitive level - the level of consumption (the sharing out of food, clothes, etc.) and not real communism

which is based on the collective ownership of the means of production. Lacking a scientific understanding of the development of society, the early Christians, despite their tremendous revolutionary spirit and heroism, were unable to realize their ideals. Their communism was of a utopian character and was doomed to fail.

### Christianity and Communism

In the early years of the church, its representatives continued to echo the original - i.e., communist - views of the movement. St. Clement wrote: “The use of all things that are found in this world ought to be common to all men. Only the most manifest iniquity makes one say to the other, ‘This belongs to me, that to you,’ Hence, the origin of contention among men.”

This is a correct observation, and clearly states that *the origin of the class struggle (“contention among men”) is the existence of private property*. The elimination of contention among men thus presupposes the abolition of private property. A similar idea was expressed by St. Basil the Great: “What thing do you call ‘yours’? What thing are you able to say is yours? From whom have you received it? You speak and act like one who upon an occasion going early to the theatre and possessing himself without obstacle of the seats destined for the remainder of the public, pretends to oppose their entrance in due time, and to prohibit them seating themselves, arrogating to his own sole use the property that is really destined to common use. And it is in precisely in this manner act the rich.”

Likewise, St. Gregory: “Therefore, if one wishes to make himself the master of every wealth, to possess it and exclude his bothers even to the third or fourth part (generation), such a wretch is no more a brother but an inhuman tyrant, a cruel barbarian, or rather, a ferocious beast of which the mouth is always open to devour for his personal use the food of the other companions.”

And St. Ambrose: “Nature furnishes its wealth to all men in common. God beneficently has created all things that their enjoyment be common to all living beings, and that the earth become the common possession of all. It is Nature itself that has given birth to the right of the community, whilst it is only unjust usurpation that has created the right of private poverty.”

And St. Gregory the Great: “The earth of which they are born is common to all, and therefore the fruit that the earth brings forth belongs without distinction to all” – to which St. Chrysostom added: “The rich man is a thief”.

These lines are sufficient to illustrate the revolutionary roots of Christianity in its early period. The early Christians were prepared to endure the most ghastly tortures in defence of their faith, defying the state and the ruling class and perishing in the arena. The reason for this ferocious persecution was that this movement of the poor and dispossessed represented a threat to the existing order. But none of these methods succeeded in crushing the movement, which derived new strength from the blood of its martyrs.

However, given the lack of a material basis for the introduction of a classless society, gradually everything changed into its opposite. Under the prevailing conditions, the leadership of the Church, starting with the bishops who were, in effect the treasurers, came under the pressure of the ruling class and the state and gradually moved away from the original communistic beliefs of the movement. Realizing the impossibility of defeating the Christians by repression, the ruling class changed its tactics. The way in which the upper layers of the Church were corrupted by the emperor Constantine can be seen in the following passage from the historian of the early Church, Eusebius, which describes the Council of Nicea in 325 AD, presided over by the emperor himself, “like some messenger of God”.

To quote Eusebius: “The circumstances of the banquet were splendid beyond description. Detachments of the bodyguard and other troops surrounded entrance of the palace with drawn swords, and through the midst of these the men of God proceeded without fear into the innermost of the imperial apartments. Some were the emperor’s own companions at table, others reclined on couches ranged on either side. One might have thought that it was a picture of Christ’s kingdom, and a dream rather than reality.” (T. Ware, *The Orthodox Church*, p.27.)

These methods are all too familiar to socialists and trade unionists today. They are precisely the same methods whereby the leaders of the trade union and labour movement are brought under the influence of bourgeois ideas and become corrupted and absorbed into the system. The tops of the movement are invited to expensive dinners and parties where they rub shoulders with the rich and famous. Ever since the Council of Nicea, the Church has been the firmest supporter of wealth, privilege and oppression.

The gains to the empire of this sell-out were palpable. The early Christians refused to recognize the state or serve in the

army. Now this was reversed. The Church became one of the main pillars of the state and ferociously persecuted anyone who called its new doctrines into question. When Arius of Alexandria rejected the Nicene creed, his supporters (the Arians) were put to the sword. Over 3,000 Christians were killed by their fellow Christians - more than in three centuries of Roman persecution. By such means did the Church of the poor and oppressed become transformed into the principal vehicle for their enslavement.

### How to Forgive Sins... and Make Money

Over a period, the Christian Church became absorbed - through its top layers - into the state. Throughout all its subsequent history the Church has taken advantage of human weakness and the fear of death to enslave men's minds and, in the process, gain enormous power and riches, in stark contrast to the teachings of the poor Galilean rebel, in whose name it purports to speak. From being a revolutionary movement of the poor and oppressed, it became a bulwark of reaction and the mouthpiece of the rich and powerful - a situation which has lasted till the present time.

The history of the Church is the complete and absolute negation of its early ideas, beliefs and traditions. On the history of the Papacy in the Middle Ages and Renaissance - an unparalleled chronicle of infamy and crime - numerous volumes have been written. We confine ourselves here to just one example which sums up the real situation and shows the abyss that separates the real situation from the hypocritical myths. In the year 1517, Pope Leo X launched the *Taxa Camerae*, in order to sell indulgences whereby one's soul could be saved for a modest sum of money. There was no crime so vile that it could not be absolved by this simple expedient. Among its 35 articles we read:

"1. The ecclesiastic who incurs carnal sin, whether with nuns, or with his cousins, nieces or daughters (sic!), and, in a word, with any woman whatsoever, shall be absolved by the payment of 67 pounds and 12 shillings.

"2. If the ecclesiastic, in addition to the sin of fornication, seeks absolution from sins against nature or bestiality, he must pay 219 pounds and 15 shillings. But if he has only committed unnatural sins with boys and beasts, and not with women, he shall pay only 131 pounds and 15 shillings.

"3. The priest who deflowers a virgin shall pay 2 pounds, 8 shillings.

"4. The nun who wishes to acquire the dignity of abbess having given herself to one or more men simultaneously or successively, whether within her convent or

without, shall pay 131 pounds, 15 shillings.

"7. The adulterous woman who seeks absolution to be free from all trials and to have ample dispensation to continue her illicit relations, shall pay the Pope 87 pounds, 3 shillings. Likewise, the husband shall pay the same sum, if he has committed incest with his children, he shall pay an additional conscience payment of 6 pounds.

"8. Absolution and certainty of non-persecution for the crimes of rape, robbery or arson, shall cost the guilty 131 pounds, 7 shillings.

"9. Absolution for simple murder committed in the person of a layman shall be fixed at 15 pounds, 3 pence.

"10. If the murderer has caused the death of two or more men in the same day, he shall pay as if he had only killed one.

"11. The husband who ill treats his wife shall pay to the chest of the chancellery 3 pounds, 4 shillings; if he has killed her, he shall pay 17 pounds, 15 shillings, and if he has killed her in order to marry another, he shall pay in addition, 32 pounds, 9 shillings. Those who have helped the husband to commit the crime, shall be absolved by the payment of 2 pounds each.

"12. He who has drowned his child, shall pay 17 pounds and 15 shillings [that is, just two pounds more than for killing a stranger}, and if the father has killed it with the mutual consent of the mother, they shall pay 27 pounds, 1 shilling for absolution.

Abortion, too, could be easily absolved:

"13. The mother who has destroyed her own child, removing it from her womb, and the husband who has contributed to the crime, shall pay 17 pounds, 15 shillings each. He who facilitates the abortion of a child that is not his own, shall pay 1 pound less.

"14. For the murder of a brother or sister, mother or father, 17 pounds, 5 shillings shall be paid.

However, if a bishop or prelate of the higher echelons of the hierarchy is murdered, the amount to pay goes up drastically - to 131 pounds, 14 shillings for the first offence, and half that amount for the rest. (15). Moreover, if the murderer "has killed many priests on various occasions, he shall pay 137, 6 shillings for the first murder, and half that amount for the rest." (16)

But far more serious than murder, rape or infanticide, was the heinous crime of heresy - that is, holding different ideas to those of the official Church. Even if a heretic becomes converted, he or she must still pay the sum of 269 pounds, whereas "the son of a heretic who has been burnt or hanged or otherwise executed in any way, cannot be

rehabilitated except by the payment of 218 pounds, 16 shillings and 9 pence." (19)

The list continues with fraud, smuggling, non-payment of debts, eating meat on holy days, bastard sons of priests who wish to take holy orders, and even eunuchs who wish to become priests (who, under point 33, had to pay no less than 310 pounds, 16 shillings).

Despite this cynical list of infamy, Pope Leo X is described by Catholic historians as the protagonist of "the most brilliant and perhaps the most dangerous period of the pontificate in the history of the Church." (See: P. Rodríguez, (1997). *Mentiras fundamentales de la Iglesia católica*. Barcelona: Ediciones B., Anexo, pp. 397-400.)

### Religion and Revolution

In every country throughout the centuries the Church has sided with the oppressors against the oppressed. The English landowners operated in close collaboration with the preachers of the Established (Protestant) Church. In France, Spain and Italy, the priests were the abject servants of the landowners and later the capitalists. However, the class contradictions in society have frequently found an expression in a religious guise, which should not surprise anyone acquainted with historical materialism.

On this subject, Trotsky wrote: "Religious, as indeed any other, ideas being born out of the soil of the material conditions of life and above all the soil of class contradictions, only gradually clear themselves away and then live on by the force of conservatism longer than the needs that gave birth to them and disappear completely only after the effects of serious social shocks and crises." (Trotsky, *Brailsford and Marxism, On Britain*, vol. 2, p. 167.)

At different periods, different religions, churches and sects have played different roles, which, in the last analysis, reflected different, and even antagonistic class interests. The first stirrings of the great revolt against feudalism were the challenges to the power and authority of the Roman Catholic Church, which found a ready echo among the masses. A Catholic historian notes that "a revolutionary spirit of hatred for the Church and the clergy had taken hold of the masses in various parts of Germany....The cry 'death to the priests!' which had long been whispered in secret, was now the watchword of the day." (Quoted in W. Manchester, *A World Lit only by Flame*, p. 161.)

Early outbursts like that of the Lollards in England and the Hussites in Germany prepared the ground for Luther's

Reformation. In all these movements there was a communistic tendency, which harked back to the early traditions of the Church, and in every case was brutally suppressed. During the English Peasants' Revolt of 1381, the chronicler Froissart reports the activities of a movement of dissident "hedge priests" led by one John Ball, who advanced communist ideas in a biblical guise with his celebrated slogan:

"When Adam delved and Eve span,  
Who was then the gentleman?"

In the period of the rise of the bourgeoisie, the Protestant religion reflected the revolt of the nascent bourgeoisie against decaying feudalism. In this it undoubtedly played a progressive role. Protestantism was divided from birth in the sixteenth century. In the ferment of these turbulent times, a whole series of new sects emerged, representing the ideas and aspirations of different classes and sub-classes: Anabaptists, Mennonites, Bohemians, Congregationalists, Presbyterians, Unitarians. The left wing represented a clearly communistic tendency, as with Thomas Müntzer and the Anabaptists in Germany. Müntzer, a former Lutheran, broke with Luther and appealed to the peasants to rise. Despite the revolutionary import of his activities, Luther was bitterly hostile to the revolutionary movement of the German peasants whom his teachings had spurred into action. He urged the aristocracy to crush the movement in the most violent language. This was done. The most Christian princes slaughtered almost 100,000 peasants. In Saxony alone, five thousand men were put to the sword. About 300 were spared only after their women agreed to beat out the brains of two priests accused of fomenting the rebellion. Then Müntzer himself was tortured to the point of death and beheaded.

The activities of the Holy Inquisition - the Gestapo of the Counter-reformation - are too well known to warrant much comment. In the Spanish-occupied Netherlands, it was declared a capital crime for a man to have a bible in his house. Convicted heretics were burnt alive, but if they confessed and repented, the Inquisition showed mercy: the men were beheaded and the women buried alive. But what is less well known are the activities of the Protestants in the matter of suppressing dissent. Calvin, who ran a theocratic dictatorship in Geneva, had Michael Servetus burnt alive when he was on the point of discovering the circulation of the blood. Servetus pleaded for mercy - not for his life, but to be beheaded. The request was denied and he was kept roasting for half an hour.

## The English and French Revolutions

In the English Revolution of the 17th century, the most revolutionary wing, reflecting the aspirations of the lower orders of society, the artisans, labourers, that is, the nascent proletariat, found its expression in a religious form. The left wing of the movement was organized in a series of radical and democratic Protestant sects like the Fifth Monarchy men, the Ranters and the Anabaptists.

In the given historical context, these movements had a progressive and revolutionary character. They reflected the first confused stirrings of consciousness of a class that had not yet fully formed itself. After the Restoration, these radical plebeian tendencies re-appeared in a muted form as religious dissenters. Persecuted by the Monarchy with the enthusiastic backing of the Established (Anglican) Church, many of them emigrated to America, where their revolutionary energies were sublimated by the task of opening up a new continent. Over the years their revolutionary and radical origins have been entirely lost. Some of them, like the Quakers, still retain some faded elements of the old ideas, although in an extremely watered down form, which does not interfere with the successful pursuit of business interests. But mostly they have turned into a bulwark of reaction and a ferocious defence of the right wing causes. In Latin America, by a strange quirk of destiny, the evangelist sects have become the shock troops of reaction and the defenders of military dictatorships, while to some extent, at least the rank and file of the Roman Catholic Church has inclined towards the cause of the poor and oppressed.

By the time of the French revolution, over a century later, the consciousness of the masses had advanced to the point where religion played absolutely no role in their thinking. The close relation between the Church and the absolutist state was obvious to all. In the period that led up to the storming of the Bastille, the materialist philosophers like Diderot and Holbach had done a thorough job of demolishing the spiritual Bastille of religion. The French Revolution eradicated the Church root and branch. The Jacobin state was officially atheist, although Robespierre attempted to cover this fact with the fig leaf of "the Supreme Being", which convinced nobody except maybe Robespierre himself. Although the people of France were supposed to be fervent Catholics, religion practically disappeared in France after the Revolution (except in the most backward and reactionary districts like the Vendée). In fact, most of the people hated the priests whom they saw

correctly as agents of the ruling class. Only towards the end of the 19th century, especially after the Paris Commune, when the French bourgeoisie had a shock, did the latter take steps to encourage a reactionary religious revival, utilizing tricks like the manufactured "miracles" at Lourdes for the purpose.

In the Russian revolution, things were clearer still. Although the Russian working class initially came onto the stage of history in January 1905, with a priest at their head, carrying religious icons, all this was rapidly swept away after the massacre of the ninth of January, when the most Christian tsar ordered his Cossacks to open fire on the unarmed people who had come to petition him. After this, religion played no role in the movement, which was organized and led by the Marxists. After the victory of the October Revolution, the collapse of the Church's influence was even swifter and more complete than it had been in France.

"The Orthodox Church," wrote Trotsky, "while not having overcome primitive peasant mythology as time went on, turned into the apparatus of Tsarism. The priest walked hand in hand with the constable and any development of sectarian dissent was met with repression. It was for this reason that the roots of the Orthodox Church proved to be so weak in the popular consciousness and especially in the industrial centres. In shaking off the bureaucratic ecclesiastic apparatus the Russian worker in his overwhelming mass and together with him, the peasant milkmaid, shook off religious thinking altogether." (Ibid., p. 164.)

It is a devastating comment on the way in which Stalinism threw back the consciousness of society that immediately after the collapse of the USSR, all the old muck has revived: nationalism, anti-Semitism, fascism, monarchism - and along with all these glories of Tsarism - religion and superstition. These remnants of medieval barbarism spread like a plague through the sick and shattered body of Russia, displaying to all the world the real nature of the "market" and the fact that the bourgeoisie in Russia offers nothing except the prospect of economic, social and cultural decline.

## The Church and Socialism

The rise of the modern labour movement in the last decade of the 19th century and the period before the First World War presented the religious Establishment with a challenge. Without exception the Church placed itself on the side of the exploiters and in opposition to socialism and the labour movement. In order to prevent the spread of socialist ideas in the working class, the

Catholic Church took steps to split the labour movement, setting up separate Catholic trade unions, women's and youth organizations, to compete with the Social Democracy. In fact, the Church copied their organizational methods from the Social Democracy.

The Church hierarchy -always so obliging to the rich and powerful - looked upon socialism and the labour movement with undisguised suspicion and antagonism. Pope Leo XIII in his Encyclical on Labour underlined the hostility of the Vatican to socialism :

"The Socialists, working on the poor man's envy of the rich, endeavour to destroy private property, and maintain that personal property should become the common property of all. They are emphatically unjust, because they would rob the lawful possessor... If one man hires out to another his strength or his industry, he does this in order to receive in return the means of livelihood, with the intention of acquiring a real right, not merely to his wage, but also to the free disposal of it. Should he invest this wage in land it is only his wage in another form...

"It is precisely in this power of disposal that ownership consists, whether it be a question of land or other property. Socialists ... strike at the liberty of every wage-earner, for they deprive him of the liberty of disposing of his wages. Every man has, by the law of Nature, the right to possess property of his own...

"It must be within his right to own things, not merely for the use of the moment, not merely things that perish in their use, but such things whose usefulness is permanent and stable.

"...Man is prior to the state, and he holds his natural rights prior to any right of the State... When man spends the keenness of his mind and the strength of his body in winning the fruits of Nature, he thereby makes his own that spot of Nature's field which he tills, that spot on which he sets the seal of his own personality. It cannot but be just that that spot should be his own, free from outside intrusion..."

Pope Leo XIII also wrote: "Christian democracy, by the very fact that it is Christian, must be based upon the principles of Divine Faith in its endeavours for the betterment of the masses. Hence to Christian democracy justice is sacred. It must maintain that the right of acquiring and possessing property cannot be gainsaid, and it must safeguard the various distinctions and degrees which are indispensable in every well-ordered commonwealth. It is clear, therefore, that there is nothing common between Social and Christian democracy. They differ from each

other as much as the sect of Socialism differs from the Church of Christ."

As James Connolly, the great Irish Marxist and revolutionary martyr, whose polemics with the Catholic Church remain classic statements of socialism, commented: "If one of the boys at the National Schools could not reason more logically than that he would remain in the dunce's seat all his schooldays. Imagine a priest who defends landlordism as Father Kane and the Pope does saying, 'The man who has tilled a field through the winter and spring has a right to hold as his own the harvest which he has earned', and imagining that he is putting forward an argument against Socialism. Socialists do not propose to interfere with any man's right 'to hold what he has earned'; but they do emphatically insist that such a man, peasant or worker, shall not be compelled to give up the greater part, or any, of 'what he has earned', to an idle class whose members 'toil not, neither do they spin', but who have attained their hold upon the nation's property by ruthless force, spoliation and fraud." (J. Connolly, *Selected Writings*, pp. 78-9.)

On 21st September 1958, Pope Pius XII wrote: "The multiplicity of classes correspond fully to the designs of the Creator". That is to say, the Church considers class society to be fixed, eternal *and of divine origin*. Just compare that to the statement of St. Clement (already quoted above) who wrote: "The use of all things that are found in this world ought to be common to all men. Only the most manifest iniquity makes one say to the other, 'This belongs to me, that to you,' Hence, the origin of contention among men."

The position of Pius XII is just the same as the lines of the old Anglican hymn All Things Bright and Beautiful, which contains the well-known lines:

"The rich man in his castle, the poor man at his gate: He [God] made the high and lowly and ordered their Estate".

This is absolutely typical of the attitude of the Church for centuries: an overt defence of the status quo and the division of society into classes.

Subsequently, as a result of the growth of the labour movement and the irresistible movement in the direction of socialism, the Catholic Church was compelled to modify its stance. Pope John XXIII - the most intelligent of all Popes in the 20th century - assumed a more progressive position. But under the present Pontiff, this has been sharply reversed.

## The Church Today

"Does not every minute of your practical life give the lie to your theory? Do you consider it wrong to appeal to the courts when you are cheated? But the apostle writes that that is wrong. Do you offer your right cheek when you are struck on the left, or do you not institute proceedings for assault? Yet the Gospel forbids that [...] Are not most of your court proceedings and the majority of civil law concerned with property? But you have been told that your treasure is not of this world." (Marx and Engels, *On Religion*, p. 35.)

The activities of the Church in modern society are based on the most glaring contradictions and hypocrisy, as Marx pointed out in the passage quoted above. The revolutionary traditions of early Christianity bear absolutely no relation to the present situation. Ever since the 4th Century AD, when the Christian movement was hijacked by the state and turned into an instrument of the oppressors, the Christian Church has been on the side of the rich and powerful and against the poor. Today the main churches are extremely wealthy institutions, closely linked to big business, in addition to the huge sums they get from the state, both in Moslem and Christian countries.

In Spain, until recently, the Catholic Church, in addition to its huge wealth in land, buildings and bank accounts, was regularly subsidized by the state out of the taxes paid by all citizens, whether they are religious or not, although the people of Spain were never consulted about this imposition. The same was true of other countries where the Church has reached a deal with the state establishing a privileged and lucrative position. Whatever one thinks about religion, such a state of affairs is clearly an intolerable violation of democracy. And although now, Spanish taxpayers are given the right to choose whether or not to donate money to the Church, the fact is that the latter is still given a privileged position to get access to public funds.

In the Middle Ages the Catholic Church declared usury (the lending of money at interest) to be a deadly sin, now the Vatican owns a big bank and possesses enormous wealth and power. The Church of England, apart from numerous other business interests, is one of the biggest landowners in Britain. It would be easy to show that the same state of affairs exist everywhere. Nor is this phenomenon confined to the Christian religion. The Koran also prohibited usury, yet in all so-called Islamic countries one sees big banks owned by Moslems. True, they resort to all manner of tricks to hide the fact, but the interest is still squeezed out of the people just the same.

Politically, the churches have systematically backed reaction. In the 1930s Catholic bishops blessed the armies of Franco in their campaign to crush the Spanish workers and peasants. The Spanish fascist press frequently published photos of prelates giving the fascist salute. Pope Pius XII backed Hitler and Mussolini. The Pope remained silent about the millions who were exterminated in the Nazi death camps, and, although officially, the Vatican was supposed to be neutral in the Second World War, in fact its pro-Nazi sympathies are well documented. G. Lewy writes:

“From the beginning until the end of Hitler’s rule, the bishops never tired of admonishing the faithful to accept his government as the legitimate authority to whom obedience had to be rendered [...] After the unsuccessful assassination attempt upon Hitler in Munich on November 8, 1939, Cardinal Bertram, in the name of the German episcopate, and Cardinal Faulhaber for the Bavarian bishops sent telegrams of congratulation to Hitler. The Catholic press all over Germany, in response to instructions from the *Reichspresskammer*, spoke of the miraculous working of providence that had protected the Führer.” (G. Lewy, *The Catholic Church and Nazi Germany*, NY, 1965, p.310-11.)

“On two important points the German documents show impressive agreement,” writes Saul Freidhandler, “On the one hand, the Sovereign Pontiff seems to have had a predilection for Germany which does not appear to have diminished by the nature of the Nazi regime and which was not disavowed up to 1944; on the other hand, *Pius XII feared a Bolshevization of Europe more than anything else* and hoped, it seems, that Hitler Germany, if it were eventually reconciled with the Western Allies, would become the essential rampart against any advance of the Soviet Union toward the West.” (Saul Friedhandler, *Pius XII and the Third Reich, A Documentation*, NY, 1958, p. 236, my emphasis, AW.)

In the history of ideas, the Church has always played a most reactionary role. Galileo Galilei was forced to recant his ideas under threat of torture by the Holy Inquisition. Giordano Bruno was burnt at the stake. Charles Darwin was mercilessly hounded by the religious Establishment in England for daring to challenge the accepted idea that God had created the world in six days.

To this day, the theory of evolution is under attack by the religious Right in the USA who want the first Book of Genesis to be taught in American schools in preference to the theory of evolution. In the USA the

religious right is a well funded movement that preaches reactionary causes. A few years ago, Nelson Bunker Hunt, the Texas oil magnate, pledged “more than \$10 million to a \$1 billion fund drive of the Campus Crusade for Christ. The Christian Freedom Foundation, an “educational lobby” is funded by J. Howard Pew, the founder of the Sun Oil Company and “other businessmen who espouse the free enterprise system”. There are many other examples which show the close relation between the religious right and Big Business. These wealthy business people do not invest such sums for nothing. Religion is here used explicitly as a weapon of reaction.

The Creationist movement in the USA involves millions of people and is -incredibly - spearheaded by scientists, included some geneticists. This is a graphic expression of the intellectual consequences of the decay of capitalism. It is an extremely striking example of the dialectical contradiction of the lag of human consciousness. In the most technologically advanced country in the world, the minds of millions of men and women are sunk in barbarism. Their level of consciousness is not much higher than when men sacrificed themselves before graven idols and burnt witches at the stake. If this movement were to succeed, as one scientist recently put it, we would be back in the Dark Ages.

In the field of social legislation, and particularly the rights of women, the Roman Catholic Church has always played a reactionary role. It still denies women the right to control their own bodies, denying the right to divorce, contraception and abortion. The present Pope, Karol Wojtyla, is outspoken on this question. The persistent opposition of the Church to artificial means of contraception is particularly disastrous in relation to AIDS. Yet a 1999 Gallop Poll of American Catholics showed that 80 percent of laymen and 50 percent of priests approved of artificial contraception, while a poll by the University of Maryland found that two-thirds of Catholics agreed that where their conscience was at odds with the pope, they should follow their conscience. Similar figures can be cited for other developed countries.

In the realm of politics, the present Pope is an outspoken reactionary and enemy of Marxism and Socialism. He was helped to power by the Opus Dei - that notorious Catholic Mafia which has its tentacles in every corner of political life in Italy, Spain and other countries.

### Lenin on Religion

Engels pointed out in his preface to

The Civil War in France that “in relation to the state, religion is a purely private affair.” Commenting on this, Lenin wrote in 1905: “The state must not concern itself with religion; religious societies must not be bound to the state. Everyone must be free to profess whatever religion he likes, or to profess no religion, i.e., to be an atheist, as every Socialist usually is.” (Lenin, *On Religion*, p. 8.)

However, in relation to the Party, Lenin also pointed out that Engels recommended that the revolutionary party should carry out a struggle against religion: “The party of the proletariat demands that the state shall declare religion a private matter, but it does not for a moment regard the question of a fight against the opium of the people - the fight against religious superstition, etc., - as a private matter. The opportunists have so distorted the question as to make it appear that the Social Democratic *Party* regards religion as a private matter.” (Ibid., p. 18)

And he added that “the roots of modern religion are deeply embedded in the social oppression of the working masses, and in their apparently complete hopelessness before the blind forces of capitalism [...] no amount of reading matter, however enlightening, will eradicate religion” from the consciousness of the masses, “until the masses, themselves, learn to fight against the social facts from which religion arises in a united, disciplined, planned and conscious manner - *until they learn to fight against the rule of the capitalist in all its forms*”. (Ibid., pp. 14-15.)

However, Marxists must do everything possible to involve all workers in the struggle against capitalism, including those who are religious. We must not erect barriers between ourselves and these workers, but encourage them to participate actively in the class struggle.

As we have already seen, in 1905, the Russian working class entered the stage of history with a priest at their head, carrying religious icons in their hands, and a petition to the tsar - the “little Father”. They distrusted the revolutionaries and sometimes even beat them up. Yet all that changed in 24 hours after the massacre of the ninth of January. The same workers, on the night of the ninth, came to the revolutionaries, demanding arms. That is how rapidly consciousness can change in the heat of events!

By the way, Father Gapon, who had organized the petition and the peaceful demonstration, and who had been working for the tsarist police, himself underwent a sudden transformation after Bloody Sunday. He called for the revolutionary overthrow of the tsar, and even came close

to the Bolsheviks at one point. Lenin did not push him away, but tried to win him, although Gapon remained religious.

Lenin's flexible attitude was shown by his attitude to strikes. He warned against a sectarian attitude towards those workers who were religious but who participated in strikes: "To preach atheism at such a time [i.e., during a strike] and in such circumstances, would only be *playing into the hands* of the church and the priests, who would desire nothing more than to have the workers participating in the strike movement divided in accordance with religious beliefs." (Ibid., p. 16.)

This is the gist of the matter. We fight for the unity of the workers' organizations above all lines of division: religious, national, linguistic or racial. Our task is to unite all the oppressed and exploited in one army against the bourgeoisie.

Marxists have never made the acceptance of atheism part of the party programme. That kind of nonsense was always a hallmark of anarchism. Very often a worker who is still a believer approaches the movement, convinced of its general programme and eager to fight for socialism, but unwilling to renounce religion. What attitude should we take? Certainly not to push him away. Such a worker does not wish to join the movement in order to win converts to religion, but to fight capitalism. Probably, in time he will see the contradiction between his political and religious beliefs and gradually abandon religion. But the question is a delicate one and should not be pushed. As Lenin explained, Marxists "are absolutely opposed to the slightest affront to these workers' religious conviction". (Ibid., p. 17.)

It is an entirely different matter when a middle class intellectual seeks to introduce confusion into the ideology of the movement, as was the case when Lenin was writing on religion. A group of ultra-left Bolsheviks (Bogdanov, Lunacharsky, etc.) were trying to revise Marxism by introducing mystical philosophical notions. Lenin quite rightly fought against this trend.

### **The Future of Religion**

What will be the future of religion? On this question, of course, there will be a profound difference of opinion between Marxists and Christians and other religions. Naturally, it is not possible to look into the future as with a crystal ball, but one can say the following. Although from a philosophical point of view, Marxism is incompatible with religion, it goes without saying that we are opposed to any idea of prohibiting or repressing religion. We stand for the complete freedom of the individual to

hold any religious belief, or none at all.

What we do say is that there should be a radical separation between church and state. The churches must not be supported directly or indirectly out of taxation, nor should religion be taught in state schools. If people want religion, they should maintain their churches exclusively through the contributions of the congregation and preach their doctrines in their own time. The same basic observations hold good for Islam or any other religion.

As far as we are concerned, the dialogue on religion will continue, but must not be allowed to obscure the fundamental problem of our epoch. Our first and overriding task is to unite in struggle with all those who wish to put an end to the dictatorship of Capital that keeps the human race in a state of slavery. Socialism will permit the free development of human beings, without the constraint of material needs.

For centuries, organized religion has been used by the exploiters to deceive and enslave the masses. Periodically, there have been revolts against this situation. From the Middle Ages to the present day, voices have been raised in protest against the subordination of the Church to the rich and powerful. We see this also at the present time. The suffering of the workers and peasants, the martyrdom of the human race under the infamous despotism of Capital, is arousing the indignation of wide layers of people, many of whom are not acquainted with the philosophy of Marxism, but who are willing to fight against injustice and exploitation. Among these are many honest Christians and even the lower orders of the clergy, who daily bear witness to the sufferings of the masses.

The Theology of Liberation is an expression of the revolutionary ferment in Central and Latin America. The lower orders of the priesthood are appalled by the suffering of the oppressed masses and have taken their place in the struggle for a better life. The Church hierarchy, which for hundreds of years has developed a comfortable relation with the rich landowners, bankers and capitalists, combat the new trend or grudgingly tolerate it. Thus, the class struggle has penetrated into the ranks of the Roman Catholic Church itself.

Similarly, among Moslems, the ideas of Marxism have begun to gain an echo, as the oppressed masses of the Middle East, Iran, Indonesia, begin to take action to improve their lives and look for a programme of struggle to overthrow their oppressors.

What is required is the overthrow of capitalism, landlordism and imperialism. Without that, no way forward is possible. The

only programme that can ensure the victory of this struggle is that of revolutionary Marxism. A fruitful collaboration between Marxists and Christians (and Moslems, Hindus, Buddhists, Jews and followers of other religions) in the struggle to transform society is absolutely possible and necessary, despite the philosophical differences that separate us. Honest Christians are deeply offended by the terrible oppression suffered by the majority of the human race. Camillo Torres, a former Colombian priest, once declared: "I have cast off the priest's habit in order to become a real priest. It is the duty of every Catholic to be a revolutionary; it is the duty of every revolutionary to carry out the revolution. The Catholic who is not a revolutionary is living in mortal sin."

These are the worthy successors of those early Christian revolutionaries who stood for the cause of the poor of the earth, the sinners and the oppressed, and were not afraid to give their lives fighting against oppression. They are the modern martyrs whose memory should be held in respect by all who hold dear the cause of freedom and justice. Between 1968 and 1978, over 850 priests, nuns and bishops were arrested, tortured, murdered and killed in Latin America. The Salvadorian Jesuit Rutilio Grande, before he was killed was quoted as saying: "Nowadays, it is dangerous [...] and practically illegal to be an authentic Christian in Latin America." The emphasis is on the word "authentic".

### **An Alternative Life?**

Although organized religion has lost a lot of ground in recent years, religious ideas have re-surfaced in a bewildering array of sects and cults, some offering an "alternative life style". To the degree that this can sometimes reflect a growing dissatisfaction among a layer of the youth with the capitalist system, its inhuman, soulless outlook on life, the empty commercialisation of all aspects of existence, the crude materialism, the endless and all-pervasive money-grubbing, the rape of the environment etc., it can represent the first step towards consciousness. But then the problems begin. It is not enough simply to reject capitalism. It is necessary to take concrete steps to abolish it.

The common feature of all these "alternative" movements - New Ageism, etc. - is that they base themselves on a purely individual type of salvation. Along this road, no way out is possible. And in the last analysis, the protagonists of this so-called alternative present no alternative whatsoever. Capitalism can live quite happily with a few people who have decided to "drop out". This presents no threat to

it, since the masters of power continue to control the life of society as before.

Even those who profess to “drop out” will find in practice that they cannot drop out. They are obliged to use money, buy the necessities of life in the shops, fill up their old vans at modern filling stations, where they will purchase their products from the big oil companies that ravage and pollute the environment, be shunted from one area to another by the cops - just like the rest of us.

The idea that it is possible to turn one’s back on society and politics is an illusion. Just try it! And you will find that one day politics will come to your house and ring the doorbell (if it does not smash the door down first).

The attempt to find an individual solution is essentially reactionary because the only way to fight against capitalism and the bourgeois state is to unite the working class and organize it in a revolutionary movement. To opt out of this is, one way or another, to place yourself at the mercy of Capital and to help perpetuate the existing order.

In order to cover their nakedness, the advocates of New Ageism claim to stand for special spiritual values which - as they imagine - sets them apart from “ordinary” mortals and places them in a direct line of communication with supernatural things that passeth all understanding. They thus feel themselves superior to the rest of humanity which is not privy to these great Mysteries.

In reality, these ideas are not superior to the thinking of ordinary mortals but rather far beneath it. The first law for one who seeks to change society is to understand it and live in it. By trying to turn one’s back on society, all that is achieved is to become completely powerless in the face of existing society, and to renounce eternally, hopelessly, irrevocably, all chance of changing it. Along this path lies not an alternative, but only more of the same - forever.

### **Religion and the Crisis of Capitalism**

Religion is what Marxists would call a false consciousness, because it directs our understanding away from the world and towards an otherness, about which we can know nothing and about which it is useless even to ask questions. The whole history of science sets out from two fundamental assumptions: a) The world exists outside myself and b) I can understand this world, and even if there are things which I do not know at present, at least I am capable of knowing them in the future. To establish a limit beyond which human knowledge is not supposed to trespass is to open the door to all manner of mysticism and superstition. Yet for more than

2,000 years, humankind has been struggling to acquire knowledge of ourselves and the world we live in. For all that time, religion has been the enemy of scientific advance, and not by accident. To the degree that the advance of scientific thought has enabled us to understand things that in the past were seen as “mysteries”, religion has been pushed back and now finds itself fighting a desperate rear-guard action to save itself.

In the struggle of science against religion - that is to say, the struggle of rational thought against irrationality - Marxism sides wholeheartedly with science. But there is more to it than that. The whole purpose of acquiring rational knowledge of the world is to change it. The inner meaning of all human history for the last 100,000 years - and more - is a ceaseless struggle of humanity to win the battle with nature, to control its own destiny and thus to become free. The roots of religion lie in the distant past, when humans were struggling to free themselves from the animal world from whence we come. In order to make sense of natural phenomena which were beyond their control, humans had recourse to magic and animism - the earliest forms of religion. In its day, this represented a step forward in human consciousness. This infantile stage of consciousness should have been left behind long ago, but the human mind is infinitely conservative and clings to concepts and prejudices that have long lost any reason to exist.

In class society, the concept of “love thy neighbor” has a hollow ring. The market economy, with its attendant morality of dog eat dog, beggar my neighbor etc., renders this a difficult, nay, an impossible proposition. In order to change the conduct and psychology of men and women it is first necessary to change the way in which they live. In the words of Marx, “social being determines consciousness”. The entire world is dominated by a handful of gigantic monopolies which plunder the globe, ravish the planet, destroy the environment and condemn countless millions to a life of unbearable misery and suffering.

The ladies and gentlemen who sit on the boards of directors of these multinational corporations are mostly practising Christians, with a lesser number of Jews, Moslems, Hindus and other creeds. However, the real religion of capitalism is none of these. It is the worship of Mammon, the god of wealth. Capitalism turns human relations inside out. So twisted and distorted have things become that we refer to a man as being “worth a million dollars” - as if we were speaking about an article of merchandise. The television refers to the stock exchange,

the market, the dollar and the pound as if they were living beings (“The pound was a little better today”). This is what alienation is all about: dead things (Capital) are seen as alive and living things (people, labour) are regarded as dead, trivial, meaningless.

Human development has a descending line as well as a line of ascent. The layer of modern culture and civilization which has been built up for thousands of years is still very thin. Below it lies all the elements of barbarism. If anyone doubts that, let them study the history of Nazi Germany, or the recent events on the Balkans. In its period of ascent, the bourgeoisie stood on the ground of rationalism - yes, and atheism too. Now, in the period of capitalist decay, irrational trends appear everywhere - even in the most advanced and “cultured” states. If the working class does not succeed in changing society, all the gains of the past will be under threat, and the future human civilization itself will no longer be guaranteed.

The devastation inflicted by capitalism on the entire world has produced countless monstrosities. In its period of senile decline, it has also given rise to religious and mystical tendencies of the most retrograde sort. The reactionary role of religion can be seen today all over the world, from Afghanistan to Northern Ireland. On all sides we see the ugly monster of fundamentalism: not just Islamic fundamentalism, but Christian, Jewish and Hindu fundamentalism. The message of brotherly love and hope is turned into the flames of despair, hate and mutual slaughter. Along this road, nothing is possible except barbarism and the extinction of culture and human civilization.

The cause of these horrors is not so much religion itself, as superficial observers try to maintain, but the crimes of capitalism and imperialism, which devastate whole countries and communities and destroys the fabric of society and the family without putting anything in its place. Fearful of the future and despairing of the present, people seek solace in the supposed “eternal truths” of a non-existent past. The rise of so-called religious fundamentalism is only a concrete expression of the impasse of capitalist society, which drives people to despair and madness. But, as we see in Iran and Afghanistan, the promises of a religious heaven on earth is an empty dream that ends in a nightmare.

Religion cannot explain anything that is happening in the world today. Its role is not, in fact, to explain, but only to console the masses with dreams and rub on their wounds the balm of a false promise. But one always awakes from a dream, and the effects of even the sweetest balm soon wear

off, creating a pain more intense than ever. Religion is a false consciousness, when what is needed is a real consciousness - a scientific view of the universe and our place in it. The prior condition for winning our freedom as human beings is a radical break with dreams and a willingness to see the world as it is and ourselves as what we are: mortal men and women, striving for an existence worthy of human beings on this earth.

### Humanity Alienated from Itself

From time immemorial, men (and still more women) have been educated in a spirit of servility. We have been taught to think that we are weak, impotent, that, no matter what we do, it makes no difference, that "man proposes, but God disposes". The prevailing idea was one of fatalism. On the great problems facing us, nothing can be done. This sense of fatalistic acceptance, of servile worship of the established fact, lies deeply embedded in all religions. The Christian is advised that if someone should strike him in the face, he should turn the other cheek, the word Islam means "submission", and the prophets of the Old Testament assure us that "all is vanity". Out of this sense of impotence comes the need for a Higher Being who is everything we ourselves are not. Man is mortal; God is immortal. Man is weak; God is strong; Man is ignorant before the mysteries of the universe; God is all-knowing, and so on.

The belief that human beings must look to the heavens for salvation also gives rise to a belief in miracles. This is by no means confined to the uneducated classes. One finds a similar superstitious cast of mind among economic forecasters and stock exchange merchants, who merely replicate on a higher level the mentality of the gambler who holds a rabbit's foot in one hand while throwing a dice with the other. In the Bible, the hungry were fed, the blind saw, the lame walked... - all through the intervention of divine miracles. Nowadays we do not require the intervention of supernatural elements to perform such miracles. The achievements of modern science and technology already permit us to do all these things. It is only the artificial constraints imposed by private ownership of the means of production and the profit system which prevents the extension of these benefits to every man, woman and child on the planet.

To the degree that men and women are able to take control of their lives and develop themselves as free human beings, Marxists believe that interest in religion - that is, the search for consolation in an afterlife - will decline naturally of itself. Of course,

believers will disagree with this prediction. Time will tell who is right. In the meantime, disagreements on such matters should not prevent all honest Christians, Hindus, Jews or Moslems who wish to participate in the fight against injustice from joining hands with the Marxists in the struggle for a new and better world.

### For a Paradise in This World!

*"If I were to begin all over again, I would [...] try to avoid making this mistake or that mistake, but the main course of my life would remain unchanged. I shall die a proletarian revolutionary, a Marxist, a dialectical materialist, and consequently an irreconcilable atheist. My faith in the communist future of mankind is not less ardent, indeed it is firmer today, than it was in the days of my youth. The faith in man and his future gives me even now such power of resistance as cannot be given by any religion."* (L. Trotsky, *Stalin*, NY 1967, p. 54.)

In his book *The Metaphysics*, Aristotle made a marvelously profound comment, when he said that man begins to philosophize when the needs of life are provided. By eliminating the old degrading dependence of men and women on material things, socialism will establish the basis for a radical change in the way we think and act. Trotsky anticipates what would occur in a classless society:

"Under socialism solidarity will be the basis of society. All the emotions which we revolutionists, at the present time, feel apprehensive of naming - so much have they been worn thin by hypocrites and vulgarians - such as disinterested friendship, love for ones neighbor, sympathy, will be the mighty ringing chords of socialist poetry." (Trotsky, *Literature and Revolution*, p.60.)

The chains of class oppression and slavery are not only material but psychological and spiritual. It will take time, even after the abolition of capitalism, to eliminate the psychological and moral scars of this slavery. Men and women who have been formed all their lives in a servile spirit will not emancipate their minds and souls immediately from the old prejudices. But once the social and material conditions are given to permit men and women to enter into a genuinely human relationship, their conduct and way of thinking will be similarly transformed. When that day dawns, people will have no need of policemen - either of the material or spiritual kind.

The ancient Greek Sophists, who were really very perceptive philosophers, maintained that "man is the measure of all things". In a classless society, this would

really be the case. But where men and women actually control their own lives and destinies in a fully conscious way, what room is there for the supernatural? Instead of thirsting after an imaginary life beyond the grave, people will concentrate all their energies in making this life as beautiful and fulfilling as it can be. This is the inner meaning of socialism: *to make actual that which was always there potentially.*

In this higher form of human society, men and women will raise themselves up to their true height. They will cleanse our world of all poverty, hate and injustice. They will restore our planet to its natural glory, its rivers, seas and cascades will be pure once more, and all the wonderful diversity of life will be protected and cherished. The clogged, congested cities will be demolished and rebuilt with all the loving care and artistic creativity humans should lavish on their environment. The depths of oceans will be explored and will give up their last secrets. Last, but not least, we will stretch out our hands to the heavens - not in prayer, but in spaceships that will bring humankind to the outermost stretches of our galaxy and perhaps beyond. When men and women enjoy such unlimited vistas of human advance, which we can attain by our own efforts and resources, unaided by any spirits, what room will there be to have recourse to religion? People will relinquish the old views to the degree that they discover that they no longer need them.

In the Bible one can find words of great wisdom, as in *Corinthians*, where we read: "When I was a child I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child. When I became a man I put aside childish things." It is the same with the development of our species. When the human race finally fulfils its destiny and is able to stand on its own two feet and live life to the full, it will no longer require the prop of religion, a supernatural being to whom to pray or the false consolation of life in another world than this. When that moment arrives, humanity will cast off religion with the same ease that grown people put aside the fairy stories which they so loved in childhood, but which have outlived their usefulness.

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