

The full story: On Marxism and religion

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“**R**eligion is the main cause of wars and conflicts through history.” How often do we hear that old idealist argument used in our day of renewed global conflict? In an earlier issue of this journal John Molyneux wrote a useful response to that position.¹ I would like to offer a critical reply to Molyneux, pointing out where he falls short but also developing one or two points further.

Molyneux’s article offers a Marxist analysis of the so-called “return to religion” in today’s geopolitical context. We see it in the Islamist opposition to Western imperialism, in the strident criticism of religion by the likes of Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens, in the strange recovery of some Christian identity by some countries (especially European) that have been deeply secular for some time, in the claims that we are returning to age-old ideological conflicts between Christianity and Islam, and even in the increasing number of us on the left who are reassessing Marxist approaches to religion. Molyneux also points out that economic realities have determined that Islam would be the focus of much hostility in the West. The reason is simply that oil and Muslim-majority states happen to be in the same areas. In a global capitalist system addicted to oil those regions have become a contested zone. He then offers a brief survey of Marx’s approach to religion, arguing that the key is not dismissal (in light of the reality of material

1: Molyneux, 2008.

circumstances) but explanation of religion. From there he assesses Richard Dawkins's *The God Delusion*, Christopher Hitchens's *God is Not Great* and Terry Eagleton's review of Dawkins's book in *The London Review of Books*.² He might have added others such as Daniel Dennett or Sam Harris, but there are more than enough books that say basically the same thing—religion is bad for you.³ Finally, Molyneux goes on to show how a Marxist analysis might provide some guidelines for assessing religion in light of opposition to exploitation and oppression. To my mind, this is the most interesting part of his article, so I will have a few more things to say about it later.

What I like about Molyneux's argument is the way he punctures the idealist assumptions behind the argument that religion is the cause of all that is bad in the world. His point that Muslim opposition arises from a long history of capitalist imperialism is well taken but not particularly new. However, the suggestion that Muslim-majority countries happen to be located where there is oil is astute. If that crucial source of cheap energy happened to be in some other part of the world where Buddhism were the dominant religion (Molyneux's example), then any concerted opposition to overdeveloped capitalist exploitation would be viewed as a hostile response by an evil and militant Buddhism. Further, his attacks on Dawkins and Hitchens are well made, especially against Hitchens who used to be a fellow-traveller on the left. Molyneux doesn't fall for the standard response to these neo-atheists by saying they really don't understand religion properly. Instead he uncovers the reactionary idealism at the heart of their works. In many respects, we may as well be back in 18th century France with characters such as Voltaire, or perhaps 19th century Germany when the likes of David Strauss, Max Stirner and Bruno Bauer felt that the most radical thing to do was attack Christianity. I would add to that the crass materialism which creeps around the edges of these works: science proves that god doesn't exist. I'm surprised they don't invoke the so-called "god gene" proposed by the geneticist Gene Harmer, who argues that some of us are genetically and psychologically predisposed to religious belief and others not.⁴

While all these criticisms are well made, Molyneux's discussion of Marx is more interesting, as is his final argument for what can be called a politics of alliance between the secular and religious left. I would like to look at both in more detail. The section on Marx is as interesting for what it doesn't say as for what it does. Molyneux focuses on the famous

2: Dawkins, 2006; Hitchens, 2007; Eagleton, 2006.

3: Dennett, 2007; Harris, 2005, 2006.

4: Harmer, 2005.

few pages in Marx's "Introduction" to his *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law*.⁵ This is where we find Marx's observations that in Germany the criticism of religion is complete, that the criticism of theology should become the criticism of politics, the criticism of heaven become the criticism of earth, and that religion is the theory of this world and the "opium of the people". While justly famous and the subject of endless analysis, there is far, far more in Marx and Engels's collected works. In fact, what I would like to do is bring Engels back into the discussion, since he is more important than many of us realise.

Most of Marx's discussions of religion appear in his earlier works, especially *The Leading Article in No 179 of the Kölnische Zeitung, Debates on Freedom of the Press and Publication of the Proceedings of the Assembly of the Estates, Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law* (and the separate introduction) and the *Theses on Feuerbach*.⁶ Written during his early years of journalism and research, these are only the most substantial. Many of his other works contain comments and observations, but if I listed them here, it would fill up the rest of the article. *Capital*, for example, is peppered with comments, allusions and references (even to Luther). By contrast, Engels wrote a number of key texts on religion over his lifetime, including *Letters from Wuppertal*, observations on religious life in Bremen while he was living there, three essays on Schelling's lectures in Berlin, a delightful satirical poem on the Bible, extended correspondence with his friends the Graeber brothers on matters theological and biblical, and then a series of major works: *The Peasant War in Germany, Bruno Bauer and Early Christianity, The Book of Revelation* and, towards the end of his life, the influential *On the History of Early Christianity*.⁷ Engels never lost the habit of alluding to or quoting a Bible verse in the midst of his polemic to hammer home a point. These number in the hundreds if not thousands in his works. Two other joint texts are also steeped in religious matters, namely *The Holy Family* and *The German Ideology*.⁸ Some, but by no means all, of these works have been gathered in various collections over time.⁹

Apart from a rather rationalist approach to religion in his home and the use of allusions in his early poetry (which is not very good), Marx never

5: Marx 1975a.

6: Marx, 1975b, 1975c, 1975a, 1975d, 1976a.

7: Engels, 1975a, 1975b, 1975c, 1975d, 1975e, 1975f, 1975g, 1975h, 1975i, 1975j, 1975k, 1975l, 1975m, 1975n, 1975o, 1975p, 1975q, 1975r, 1975s, 1975t, 1975u, 1975v, 1975w, 1975x, 1975y, 1978, 1989, 1990a, 1990b.

8: Marx and Engels, 1975, 1976a.

9: Marx, 2002; Marx and Engels, 1976b.

had any religious commitment, finding the dirty little relationship between church and the powers that be obnoxious from an early stage. At university he fell under the sway of Bruno Bauer's radical critique of religion. Bauer was a biblical scholar and Marx studied the book of Isaiah with him in Berlin (Marx's doctoral thesis shows the influence of Bauer). By contrast, Engels grew up in a pious Calvinist household in Wuppertal. Through great struggle he eventually broke with this background as he read for himself the critical literature on the Bible by the likes of David Strauss and Ludwig Feuerbach, but not before it had left him with a deep knowledge of the Bible and a lifelong interest in matters biblical and religious.

Religion and politics in 19th century Germany

As Molyneux points out, the most well known and influential argument of Marx and Engels is that religion must be explained in terms of its social and economic conditions. While Marx tended to view religion as the expression of alienation, Engels was more prepared to grant it a liberating dimension. Yet there is far more to their views on religion than this argument. Religion appears in the work of Marx and Engels in three ways: the context in which they first developed historical materialism, the use they made of religion in developing their own arguments, and explicit arguments concerning religion.

Beginning with the context, for a number of historical reasons the various German states dealt with a whole range of modern issues through religion, which really means Christianity and the Bible.¹⁰ While France had the radical atheistic criticism of Voltaire and company and while England had the deists, in Germany the debate was restricted to the nature of the Bible. Given the inseparable nature of religion and politics in the "Christian state" (as the Prussian king, Friedrich Wilhelm IV, called it), to attack the Bible or Christianity was to attack the political status quo. So we find that the most controversial works in the early part of the 19th century were David Strauss's *Das Leben Jesu*, where he argues that the accounts of Jesus in the Gospels are purely mythological,¹¹ or the arguments of the atheistic biblical critic Bruno Bauer against the oppressive particularism of religion and for a democratic self-consciousness,¹² or Ludwig Feuerbach's argument that religion is actually the projection of what is best in human beings, a projection that leads us to create an

10: See especially Breckman, 1999.

11: Strauss, 1835.

12: Bauer, 1838, 1840, 1841, 1842.

entity called “God”.¹³ Through these theological and biblical works all of the central questions were debated, such as democracy, individual rights, freedom (of the press), reason, republicanism, parliamentary representation and so on. I can’t stress enough that these debates took place above all on the territory of the Bible and theology. It was there that Marx and Engels began their philosophical and political work.

Developing a system

In order to develop their own system of thought Marx and Engels had to distinguish themselves from the overwhelming theological frame in which German thought operated in the 1830s and 1840s. For a time Marx counted himself as a friend of Bruno Bauer, hoping for a university appointment under his patronage. For his part, Engels identified closely with the Young Hegelians in Berlin, especially during his year of military service (1842). His works on Schelling and the satirical poem, *The Insolently Threatened Yet Miraculously Rescued Bible*, come from this period.¹⁴ However, as their collaborative work progressed, they had to come to terms with the major Young Hegelians, especially in the two joint works *The Holy Family* and *The German Ideology*.

Alongside Strauss’s *Life of Jesus*, Feuerbach’s *The Essence of Christianity* was one of the most significant texts of the time.¹⁵ Marx saw the idea that religion and the gods were projections of human beings as a huge breakthrough. He used and extended what may be called the “Feuerbachian inversion” at a number of points in his own work. Feuerbach’s idea is an inversion since it argues that previous thought about religion began at the wrong point, namely in the middle. God is not a pre-existing being who determines human existence; rather, human beings determine god’s existence.

Marx took this argument and claimed that it marked the end of the criticism of religion: “For Germany the *criticism of religion* is in the main complete, and criticism of religion is the premise of all criticism”.¹⁶ He went on to suggest that the first great phase of criticism—the criticism of religion—began with Luther and ended with Feuerbach. The next revolutionary phase had already begun with Feuerbach and Marx saw himself as part of that new phase.

13: Feuerbach, 1986, 1989.

14: Engels, 1975g, 1975h, 1975i, 1975j.

15: Feuerbach 1986.

16: Marx, 1975a, p175; 1976b, p378.

For Marx, Feuerbach was the last word on religion. A statement such as the following (a text that Molyneux quotes) is pure Feuerbach:

Religion is the general theory of this world, its encyclopaedic compendium, its logic in popular form, its spiritual *point d'honneur*, its enthusiasm, its moral sanction, its solemn complement, and its universal basis of consolation and justification. It is the *fantastic realisation* of the human essence since the *human essence* has not acquired any true reality.¹⁷

As Molyneux points out, Marx also wanted to go beyond Feuerbach on two counts. First, since human beings project religion from within themselves, the place to begin analysis is not in the heavens, but here on earth with flesh and blood people. Second, the fact that people do make such projections is a signal that something is wrong here on earth. If they place their hopes and dreams elsewhere, that means they could not be realised here and now. So the presence of religion becomes a sign of alienation, of economic and social oppression. *That* needs to be fixed. This theme occurs strongly in the famous *Theses on Feuerbach*, especially the fourth and eleventh theses:

Feuerbach starts out from the fact of religious self-estrangement, of the duplication of the world into a religious world and a secular one. His work consists in resolving the religious world into its secular basis. But that the secular basis lifts off from itself and establishes itself as an independent realm in the clouds can only be explained by the inner strife and intrinsic contradictoriness of this secular basis. The latter must, therefore, itself be both understood in its contradiction and revolutionised in practice. Thus, for instance, once the earthly family is discovered to be the secret of the holy family, the former must then itself be destroyed in theory and in practice.

The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world in various ways; the point is to *change* it.¹⁸

Marx would go on to use his own adaptation of the “Feuerbachian inversion” in a number of ways, not least to argue that Hegel’s position on the state was exactly the same as theology: it began with abstracted ideas

17: Marx, 1975a, p175; 1976b, p378.

18: Marx 1976a, pp4-5.

such as state, sovereignty, constitution and tried to make human beings fit.¹⁹ Much later on, in 1886, Engels would fill this picture out in his lucid prose and show why Feuerbach was so important for the development of historical materialism.

Bruno Bauer's a-theology

Given Feuerbach's importance, it is not for nothing that the first section of *The German Ideology* should be devoted to his work. There is also a section given over to Bruno Bauer. In a number of writings Marx would come back to Bauer, initially to defend him but then later to attack him mercilessly.²⁰ Even so, many years later they kept in touch and met up frequently in London when Bauer was there. But why attack Bauer? The basic reason was that Bauer achieved a radical republican and democratic position through his biblical criticism and theology. Marx in particular was thoroughly opposed to such a possibility: theology dealt with heaven and was not concerned with earth—that was the task of the new historical materialism. For Marx, Bauer was far too much under the influence of Hegel's idealist method and in many respects Marx's distancing from Bauer was an effort to come to terms with Hegel. So we find the repeated and often heavily satirical criticism that "Saint Bruno" Bauer left matters in the realm of theology and thereby stunted his critical work.

Marx was also excising the influence of someone who had been a close friend, first as a fellow member of the Young Hegelian *Doktorclub* from 1837, later as a teacher of the Book of Isaiah at the University of Berlin in 1839 and as one who might have gained Marx a position. The problem was that Bauer was removed from Berlin to Bonn in 1839 and then eventually lost his job in Bonn for his radical theological and political positions. He argued that the church was ossified and dogmatic, for it claimed universal status for a particular person and group. In the same way that we find a struggle in the Bible between free self-consciousness and religious dogmatism, so also in Bauer's own time the religious dogmatism of the church needed to be overthrown. In its place Bauer argued for atheism, democracy and republicanism.

Max Stirner's world history

So we find Marx and Engels at the point where Feuerbach's inversion has enabled them to step beyond the criticism of religion and focus on the criticism of the earthly conditions of human struggle, and Bauer's

19: See Marx, 1975d.

20: Marx, 1975e, 1975f.

radical theology had to be negated since religion cannot provide one with a radical critique. The engagement with Max Stirner is a little different. Most don't bother with the endless pages of *The German Ideology* given over to a detailed refutation of Stirner's *The Ego and His Own*,²¹ preferring to stop after the first part with the early description of the new historical materialist method.

However, the Stirner section is crucial because Marx and Engels develop the first coherent statement of historical materialism in response to Stirner's world history. In other words, Marx and Engels offer an alternative theory of the workings of world history as they develop their critique of Stirner. The way they wrote the manuscript (which was never published in their lifetime) is important: as they wrote sections on Stirner they found that increasingly coherent statements of an alternative position began emerging in their own thought. Some of these statements remain in the Stirner section, while others were moved to the beginning of the manuscript and placed in the Feuerbach chapter (especially sections II and III). What we find is that, in contrast to Stirner's radical focus on the individual, Marx and Engels develop a collective focus. Instead of Stirner's use of Jesus as the first great individual human ego, they sought an approach that was very much of this world. Above all, Stirner wanted to provide a schema of world history that was pitched against Hegel. The reason why Marx and Engels devoted so much attention to him is that they too wanted a schema of world history that overturned Hegel. The difference is that while Stirner made that lever of history the radical individual ego modelled on a very human Jesus, Marx and Engels located the lever with the internal contradictions of class, economics and modes of production. The long struggle with Stirner was an effort to overcome this residual religious influence. One only has to look at the structure of Marx and Engels's criticism, moving through the major books of the Bible and quoting the Bible *ad nauseam*, criticising Stirner's prophetic role and theological dabbling, to see that what is at stake is religion. Out of that intense struggle with Stirner the first clear statement of historical materialism arose.

Idols and fetishes

So far I have dealt with a number of arguments from religion that Marx transformed into his own approach, particularly with Feuerbach's inversion and Stirner's effort to rewrite world history from scratch. There is one other idea that fascinated Marx—fetishism. One of the most read sections

21: Stirner, 2005.

of Marx's *Capital* is the one called "The Fetishism of Commodities and the Secret Thereof".²² Here Marx traces the way commodities seem to gain a life of their own and begin to interact with one another as though they were social beings. At the same time, human social relations seem to suffer since they have become like the relations between things. It as though commodities and human beings have swapped roles. Yet this is by no means the first time Marx has made such an argument. It derives ultimately from the study of religion. Marx offers the following hint at the opening of this section in *Capital*:

A commodity appears, at first sight, a very trivial thing, and easily understood. Its analysis shows that it is, in reality, a very queer thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties.²³

So let us follow his hint and see where it leads. The first stop is with the emerging study of world religions, where data and studies were becoming available. In the early 1840s Marx read a book by Charles de Brosses called *Du culte des dieux fétiches ou Parallèle de l'ancienne religion de l'Egypte avec la religion actuelle de Nigritie*.²⁴ A pioneering work in ethno-anthropology and the history of religion, it coined the word "fetish", by which de Brosses meant an object attributed with superhuman and magical powers and thereby worshipped (in other words, an idol). With subsequent elaboration the term fetish has claimed a permanent seat for itself in the study of the history of religions. As for Marx, in preparation for his lost study on Christian art he read several works on comparative religion, including a German translation (by Pistorius) of de Brosses's book.

This is by no means the last time Marx dealt with the religious origins of fetishism. Close to the end of his life, he made some reading notes that are now called *The Ethnological Notebooks*.²⁵ It is a collection of notes and comments on the anthropologists LH Morgan (the basis for Engels's *Origin of the Family*), John B Phear, Henry Maine and John Lubbock. These notebooks are an extraordinary read, with sentences that jump around between German, English and French, good slabs of Greek and Latin and occasional terms from Russian, Sanskrit, Ojibwa and other languages, endless abbreviations, unfinished sentences, slang, vulgar terms,

22: Marx, 1996, pp81-94.

23: Marx, 1996, p81.

24: Brosses, 1760.

25: Marx, 1972.

exclamations and references to current affairs. The most interesting pages are the last few on John Lubbock. Here Marx deals explicitly with the religious side of fetishism. Marx can't stand that "civilised ass" Lubbock, but what these notes show is that Marx never lost sight of the religious element of the term fetish.

In between his reading of de Brosses and Lubbock, Marx kept adapting the idea of fetishism. He used it for political polemic, but above all it comes into service in his economic arguments, including the categories of money, labour, commodities and capitalism itself. As an example of political polemic, there is an early piece criticising the various decisions by the Rhine Province Assembly (a gathering of nobles) back in 1839. Marx accuses the Rhineland nobles of having a fetish for wood and hares, since they wished to punish the peasants who helped themselves to fallen wood and hares.²⁶ A little later (1844) Marx would develop the argument that money as a mediator of exchange is analogous to Christ the mediator. Christ is projected by human beings as the ideal mediator, whom we must worship, from whom we have our being, without whom we are worthless, and above all as the one who mediates between us and god and enables our salvation. So also does money become a quasi-divine mediator: before it too we must kneel, we gain our worth from money, its pursuit becomes our goal in life, and it mediates between objects and us.²⁷

When we get to his critique of labour and commodities, Marx extends the idea of fetishistic transference: fetishism is the transference of human social characteristics to objects and vice versa. With labour, the more the worker puts into the product he or she is making, the less the worker becomes. In the end, the product becomes hostile, alien and independent at the expense of the worker.²⁸ Or in terms of the commodity-form, the relation between commodities takes on the appearance of relations between human beings, while human beings seem to relate like objects: it is a "mysterious thing, simply because the social character of men's labour appears to them as an objective character stamped upon the product of that labour; because the relation of the producers to the sum total of their own labour is presented to them as a social relation, existing not between themselves,

26: Marx, 1975c, pp262-263.

27: Marx, 1975g, p212.

28: Marx 1975g, p272. Similarly, "Every self-estrangement of man, from himself and from nature, appears in the relation in which he places himself and nature to men other than and differentiated from himself. For this reason religious self-estrangement necessarily appears in the relationship of the layman to the priest, or again to a mediator, etc, since we are here dealing with the intellectual world" (p279).

but between the products of their labour”.²⁹ It is important to note here that Marx doesn’t say this actually happens. It is, like religion and fetishism, an illusion (he continually uses religion as an example). And it is an illusion that belongs above all to the political economists he is criticising.

This is especially so with capital itself. In a delightful passage towards the end of the extraordinary and endless *Economic Manuscript of 1861-63* Marx traces the mystification of capital. Here we find exactly the same logic: what appear to be forces and powers beyond the worker are in fact produced by free labour. But now he supplies a huge list of all the things that are fetishised: the capitalist as a personification of capital, the productive powers of capital, use-value and exchange-value, the application of forces of nature and science, the products of labour in the form of machinery, and so on. They all appear as an alien, objective presence in advance that rules over the worker. In short, capital itself becomes a power before which the worker is powerless: all these items “stand on their hind legs vis a vis the worker and confront him as capital”.³⁰ It seems that one of the problems with money, commodities and capital itself is that in the eyes of the economists who worship them they are illusory items that obscure and abstract from the process of human labour and social interaction.

The two sides of opium: the ambivalence of religion

So we can see that some of the key elements of historical materialism were developed in response to religious positions. Now I would like to shift focus to what we can call the political ambivalence of religion. This is one part of Molyneux’s argument, but he doesn’t go far enough to show that it actually comes right out of the heart of Marx and Engels’s work.

Try the following game: begin a discussion on religion and then after a while mention Marx; then ask for the first word that comes into people’s heads. Invariably the answer will be “opium”. The key passage, over which much ink has been spilled, is as follows:

*Religious suffering is, at one and the same time, the expression of real suffering and a protest against real suffering. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people.*³¹

29: Marx, 1996, pp82-83.

30: Marx, 1994, pp457-458.

31: Marx, 1975a, p175; 1976b, p378.

Too often we assume that Marx felt that he (or rather Feuerbach) had put the last nail in the coffin of religion. And too often we assume that he did not hear the knocking from the inside of the coffin. However, Marx was a little more astute than that, as Molyneux points out. Here there is a hint of the ambivalence of religion. Religious suffering may be an expression of real suffering and religion may be the sigh, heart and soul of a heartless and soulless world. But it is also a protest against that suffering. That point has been made often enough but there is an ambivalence in the most well known of Marx's phrases: it is the opium of the people. In an excellent article McKinnon points out that the role of opium was ambiguous in 19th century Europe.³² In contrast to our own associations of opium with drugs, altered states, addicts, organised crime, wily Taliban insurgents, and desperate farmers making a living the only way they can, attitudes to opium were, in Marx's day, much more ambivalent. Widely regarded as a beneficial, useful and cheap medicine at the beginning of the century, it was increasingly vilified by a coalition of medical and religious forces. In between debates raged. McKinnon traces in detail how opium was the centre of debates, defences and parliamentary inquiries, how it was used for all manner of ills and to calm children, how the opium trade was immensely profitable, how it was one of the only medicines available for the working poor, albeit often adulterated, how it was a source of utopian visions for artists and poets, and how it was increasingly stigmatised as a source of addiction and illness. In effect, it ran all the way from blessed medicine to recreational curse.

Marx himself was a regular user of opium, along with arsenic and creosote. As he followed a punishing schedule of too much writing, too little sleep and an inadequate diet, Marx would use it for his carbuncles, toothaches, liver problems, bronchial coughs and so on. As his wife Jenny wrote in a letter to Engels in 1857:

Dear Mr Engels, One invalid is writing for another by *ordre du mufti*. Chaley's head hurts him almost everywhere, terrible tooth-ache, pains in the ears, head, eyes, throat and god knows what else. Neither opium pills nor creosote do any good. The tooth has got to come out and he jibs at the idea.³³

For Marx, opium was an ambiguous and multidimensional metaphor. That is why he chose it as the key metaphor for religion.

32: McKinnon, 2006.

33: Jenny Marx, 1983, p563.

The biblical temptations of Engels

While Marx hinted at the political ambivalence of religion, Engels brought it out with his characteristic clarity. Engels grew up in a very pious Calvinist household and was clearly committed until his late teens or early twenties. In the process he came to know his Bible very well, could read the New Testament in Greek and could quote almost any verse at will. His path to liberal Christianity and then atheism turned on the question of biblical contradictions. If the Bible is the word of god, how then do we deal with its myriad contradictions? In his letters to the Graeber brothers and his poem, “The Insolently Threatened Yet Miraculously Rescued Bible”, he struggles with this issue, shifting position all the time—liberal, pantheist, Hegelian, agnostic—until he finally decides that Christianity will never change and that it is irretrievable.³⁴

Yet for all his staunch atheism in his later years, he was never quite able to excise the Bible from his thought. There is one biblical book to which he kept returning: the Book of Revelation. In his early texts Engels often made use of the scene of the final judgment at the end of history, whether playfully, in critical satire or in order to express his own sense of the times. So we find him characterising his close friend Friedrich Graeber (a minister in the church) playing cards oblivious to the final battle of good and evil that rages around him.³⁵ Then there are his mock depictions of the battles between the orthodox theologians and “The Free”, as the Young Hegelians of Berlin called themselves.³⁶ And then at the close of his booklet *Schelling and Revelation*, he makes a very different use of the Book of Revelation. Flushed and excited with the new discoveries, having just read Feuerbach’s *The Essence of Christianity* and feeling the shackles of his old, narrow belief structure snapping open, Engels celebrates with a rousing image of the final battle between free thought and obscurantism, all of which ends with the arrival of a New Jerusalem.³⁷

Later in life Engels came back to the Book of Revelation to make use of the newly established historical criticism of the Bible.³⁸ The purpose was to defuse the wild speculation and excitement the biblical book had generated over time by showing that the lurid imagery actually had a mundane historical reference point in the Roman Empire, for it refers to the expected

34: Engels, 1975l, 1975m, 1975k, 1975n, 1975o, 1975p, 1975q, 1975r, 1975s, 1975t, 1975u, 1975v, 1975w, 1975x, 1975y, 1975j.

35: Engels, 1975l.

36: Engels, 1975y, 1975j.

37: Engels, 1975h.

38: Engels, 1990a. See also Engels, 1989.

return of Nero and his defeat by god's forces. But there is one feature of this essay on the Book of Revelation that is vitally important: he points out that Christianity has at various moments been the ideology of revolutionary movements. This argument would become the centrepiece in two final works of his to be considered here, *On the Early History of Christianity* and *The Peasant War in Germany*.

While *The Peasant War in Germany* is mostly concerned with Engels's great love, namely tracing out battle plans, troop movements and assessing tactics, it also has a curious argument concerning Thomas Müntzer. The latter was the leading theologian of the revolt and war in 1525. A reformer who was deeply influenced by Luther, he took Luther's position to its logical conclusion, threw in the need for constant contact with god through dreams and visions, and predicted that the final battle of Armageddon would come soon. Needless to say he met a swift end against the heavy armour of the nobility. While many write Müntzer off as a crackpot, Engels wanted to give him his due. Müntzer was, argued Engels, expressing through theological and biblical language the grievances of class oppression and conflict. Religious language was the only way he knew how to express such grievances. If he had lived in Engels's own day the language would have been very different. Indeed, Engels gives his argument a strange twist, suggesting that the closer Müntzer gets to economic and class analysis, the more atheistic he becomes. Despite this odd move, the text gained a life of its own and the better parts of the argument were expanded by the likes of Karl Kautsky and Ernst Bloch.³⁹

What Engels had managed to do with this piece on the Peasant War was point to a revolutionary side of Christianity. Forty three years later, two years before his death, he wrote *On the History of Early Christianity*, where he argued that Christianity was originally a revolutionary movement. It is a text that influences biblical studies to this day. In his essay Engels relied on the relatively new critical approach to the Bible. Dispensing with dogmatic positions and seeking only what was historically verifiable, such critical readings of the Bible challenged many of the assumptions about the authorship, formation and nature of biblical literature. From this scholarship Engels drew upon conclusions concerning the Gospels and the impossibility of knowing anything much about Jesus (here he relied on Bruno Bauer, who by this time Engels admired) and repeated his earlier observations about the Book of Revelation.

The basic argument is that early Christianity was as close as one could get to a socialist movement in the ancient world. In response to the social,

39: Kautsky, 2002; Bloch, 1969.

cultural and economic breakdown of the Hellenistic world, Christianity offered a solution. Unfortunately that solution was a heavenly rather than earthly one. At this point Engels was ambivalent: even though it offered an other-worldly solution, he also argued that it was revolutionary in practice. It was, he said, the socialism of its day. In this respect it has a number of parallels with the socialism of Engels's own time—appeal to the downtrodden masses, sectarian splits, false prophets, rapid expansion and communism in living.

Conclusion: the politics of alliance

For Marx and especially Engels, a religion like Christianity is politically ambivalent. All too often it sides with the rich and powerful and turns a blind eye to oppression and suffering. But every now and then it also gives voice to rebellion and revolution. This point brings us to Molyneux's call for a politics of alliance. Molyneux argues that activists on the left shouldn't dismiss a comrade who works for the same cause if he or she happens to have a religious belief. He gives the following example: "To put the matter as starkly as possible: from the standpoint of Marxism and international socialism an illiterate, conservative, superstitious Muslim Palestinian peasant who supports Hamas is more progressive than an educated liberal atheist Israeli who supports Zionism (even critically)." He also draws on Lenin to support his position. It seems to me that this position comes out of the heart of the writings of Marx and Engels on religion. Marx's hints concerning the ambivalence of religion were taken much further by Engels who ended up arguing that early Christianity was a proto-socialist movement.

Let me finish with a couple of points. First, the old antagonism between the left and radical currents within religion, once seemingly set in cement, should be a thing of the past. We can well understand how those antagonisms came to be, for religion, power and wealth have all too often been in bed together. The history of the opposition between some types of communism and religion has not helped either. It used to be the case that if a Christian declared she or he had become a socialist, then the assumption was that that person had lost his or her faith. It does not help matters when the major churches also declare Communism to be "godless". But these are, or at least should be, things of the past. Indeed, those who do believe are not necessarily reactionary or fundamentalist. The 200,000 members of the International League of Religious Socialists put the lie to that assumption, as does the movement of Christian Communists. Both the secular and religious left have more in common than they might think.

Further, a politics of alliance recognises the diversity and pluralism of the left. Rather than the long tradition of one small group on the left feeling

as though it is the keeper of the grail, spending all its energy condemning other groups as revisionists, deviationists or heretics, the sheer diversity of the left is one of its great achievements. Within this diversity, a religious left has a legitimate and crucial role to play. For example, at the protests against the World Economic Forum in Melbourne in 2000 and then again at the G20 meeting in 2006, we found anarchists, environmentalists, socialists, feminists, various elements of the loopy left, and some religious groups for whom the protests were perfectly consistent with their religious positions.

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