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4.1 Introduction

If you call your state a *general Christian* state, you are admitting with a diplomatic turn of phrase that it is *un-Christian*. (Marx 1975a: 106, 1975b: 118)

The precarious separation of church and state is, once again, under threat. From the invocation of a vague ‘Christian heritage’ by European countries, through the contradictory debates over (Muslim) head-coverings in France and Denmark, to the open avowals of Christian belief and its effect on their political lives by leaders in the UK, Australia and Malaysia, it has once again become clear that the separation of church and state is either an impossible goal or a political fiction. At the same time, a number of major studies have appeared that challenge assumptions concerning secularism. For example, Charles Taylor argues that secularism entails not the banishment of religion but other, diverse ways of being religion. And Talal Asad proposes that the separation of religion and the state is not the removal of religion from public affairs but another means for the state to control religion (Taylor 2007; Asad 2003).

Rather than rushing to yet another new proposal concerning religion and the state, it is worth considering the rich heritage of Marxist thought to see whether there are not a few good resources that might be deployed. So I turn to an old and somewhat neglected discussion that has an increasing and surprising relevance in our own time, namely the contributions of Marx and Engels in the context of the heated debates over the issue of religion and politics in the 1830s and 1840s. They write of the situation in Germany in the mid-nineteenth century, when Friedrich Wilhelm IV, the King of Prussia, desperately tried to hang onto the idea of a Christian

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state. Marx and Engels mercilessly explore the contradictions in that position. More specifically, in digging out some fascinating material from the early 1840s, we find that Marx's texts manifest a tension that is still present in our own debates. On the one hand, in *Comments on the Latest Prussian Censorship Instruction* (which ironically did not pass the censor (Marx 1975a, 1975b)¹), Marx argues that religion is a particular concern and that it really should have no part in the general matters of the state. On the other hand, in *On the Jewish Question* (1974, 1975e) Marx points out that the secular state is born out of the contradictions within the Christian state. At this point I bring Engels into the discussion, looking at an astute journal article of his from the same time, *Frederick William IV, King of Prussia*; for here Engels takes a very similar position to the second one Marx adopted (1975b, 1985). Needless to say, while Marx's initial position is still a common one today and has less and less mileage, the second, more dialectical, position is a far more interesting one, for it recognises the tensions within secularism itself.

4.2 Banishing the Particular

In his first journalistic article, where he reflects on the revisions to the Prussian censorship law of 1842, Marx develops an argument that leads to the following conclusion: the only way to allow a plurality of religions within any state is to have a secular state. In other words, religious tolerance is based on a secular indifference to religion. Muslims, Hindus, Greenlandic shamans, Christians and so on can all exist together as long as I am indifferent to them all. Still common today, especially with the increasing presence of religion within politics, this conclusion is in itself quite unremarkable. However, I am more interested in the way the 24 year old Marx arrives at such a conclusion. The starting point is an old friend, namely the distinction between the general and the particular. Religion is, by definition, a particular beast. Each religion makes a truth claim, based on the specific nature of its own belief and doctrines, that excludes all others. They are, if you like, complete worldviews that cannot tolerate any other complete worldview: 'each religion believes itself distinguished from the various other *would-be* religions by its *special nature*, and that precisely its *particular features* make it the *true religion*' (Marx 1975a: 104, 1975b: 116). It follows, then, that any idea of religion in general is a contradiction. One cannot talk about the general features of religion, since that involves denying the specific features that make each religion what it is. These features held in common must of necessity discard any positive content of any specific religion. The result: the idea of religion in general is nothing other than a non-religious position.² In short, such a general religion is another version of secularism.

¹ Where Marx and Engels wrote the original text in German, I cite the English source first and then the German source.

² 'This *rationalist point of view* ... is so inconsistent as to adopt the irreligious point of view while its aim is to protect religion' (Marx 1975a: 103–104, 1975b: 116).

What is wrong with this argument? Apart from the use of the generic term ‘religion’, which should be ruled out by the argument itself, the sample pool is a little restricted. Marx’s context has something to do with this, especially in light of the Thirty Years War fought between Roman Catholics and Protestants (1618–1648). In one sense, the controversies of the 1830s and 1840s provided yet another turn in the rumbling history of the Reformation. From Luther’s defiance (and assistance by the Duke of Saxony) in the sixteenth century to the Thirty Years War that raged over the German states, Italy and the Low countries, Protestants in the north and Roman Catholics in the south had dug themselves in to become deeply conservative. The Roman Catholics looked to the Pope, while the Protestants (a mix of Lutherans and some Calvinists in the far north) drew upon conservative streams of pietism, marrying an inner walk with God to a tenacious hold on the Bible as the ‘word of God’. Despite all the best efforts of the Prussian state to keep both Protestants and Catholics in a civil if often fractious relationship, the mutual antagonism ran deep. Thus, during his early experiences with journalism, Marx found that one of the major dividing lines between the various newspapers was in terms of the Catholic/Protestant divide.³

In fact, Marx goes on to use this difference between Roman Catholics and Protestants to argue against the push for a Christian state under the Prussian king, Friedrich Wilhelm IV. If it is to be a Christian state, then what type of Christianity will be the religion in favour—Roman Catholic or Protestant? Favouring one would exclude the other as heretical. Why? The ‘innermost essence (*innerstes Wesen*)’ (Marx 1975a: 105, 1975b: 118) of one is completely at odds with the other. Even more, all else becomes secondary, for one ‘who wants to ally himself with religion owing to religious feelings must concede it the decisive voice in all questions’ Marx 1975a: 106, 1975b: 118.

This is not the best argument, despite the fact that it is recited regularly today. Not all religions operate with mutually exclusive worldviews, even though many do. The obvious example is Hinduism, which prides itself on the fact that it is inclusive rather than exclusive, that it is perfectly possible to be a Hindu pursuing a potentially infinite range of specific practices and beliefs. The nice catch here is that Hindus will claim that this feature makes Hinduism superior, all the while neglecting to mention the ingrained caste system. I could also cite more open-minded forms of Christianity rather than what we would now call fundamentalist exclusivism. Then there is the long story of syncretism, the gradual acquisition of all manner of ‘pagan’ practices into any religion that found itself expanding—whether Mahayana Buddhism as it moved into China and Japan, or indeed Christianity as it spread from Palestine to Rome and then across Europe, drawing in all manner of fertility and solstice festivals along with a good collection of spirits.

³This deep tension shows up in various observations and passing comments concerning German politics and society in Marx’s endless journalistic pieces (See, e.g., Marx 1980a: 127, 1980d: 57, 1980e: 96, 99).

4.3 *Aufhebung* of the Christian State

Marx's initial position, then, is to argue that the exclusive particularity of each religion rules out any generic notion of religion and that therefore the state cannot support religion in any general sense. It must either support one religion to the exclusion of all others or (since the first position is highly undesirable in the name of religious tolerance) support none. Only through complete secular indifference to religion can the state function at all.

But now we come to a disconnection with this initial argument by Marx. Over against his separation of particular and general, Marx makes a much more perceptive dialectical observation in *On the Jewish Question*. Here he argues that the fully realised Christian state is not what everyone thinks it is (the 'Christian state' of Friedrich Wilhelm IV); rather, the true Christian is the negation of Christianity: that is, a, secular, atheistic and democratic one (Marx 1974: 357–359, 1975e: 156–158).⁴ The crucial point here is that the contradictions inherent within the idea and practice of a Christian state can only lead to its dissolution. These contradictions include the tension between otherworldly religion and this-worldly politics, the problems inherent in a political attitude to religion and a religious attitude to politics, the impossibility of actually living out the prescriptions of the Bible for living with one's fellow human beings (turning the other cheek, giving your tunic as well as your coat, walking the extra mile and so on). What is the resolution of these contradictions? It is 'the state which relegates religion to a place among other elements of civil society (*der bürgerlichen Gesellschaft*)' (Marx 1974: 357, 1975e: 156).⁵ This is the realised Christian state, that is, one that has negated itself and relegated Christianity to its own, private place among other religions and other parts of society. This is of course the way in which religion now operates in secular Western societies. In his own time Marx espied its arrival in the United States, with the separation of church and state making religion a private affair (In his usual comprehensive fashion, Charles Taylor (2007) makes a similar argument, namely that secularism is another way of being religious).

What is intriguing about this argument is that this modern secular state arises from, or is the simultaneous realisation and negation of, the Christian state. This argument is a long way from Marx's efforts to banish the particularity of religion from any form of the state. Marx's argument for the simultaneous negation and realisation (the famous *Aufhebung*) of the Christian state in the secular state may move in a number of directions. To begin with, one may connect it with a point

⁴Another example of Marx's awareness of the contradictions inherent in the Christian state appears in his long discussion of thefts of fallen wood (his third piece of commentary on the Sixth Rhine Province Assembly). He points out the paradox of the Reformation's abolition of monasteries and secularisation of their property. Although it was a necessary step to get rid of an abusive institution, it also had its downside, for nothing replaced the meagre support the poor had received from the monasteries (Marx 1975f: 232, 1975g: 207).

⁵Or as he puts it in his debate with Bruno Bauer, the 'modern state that knows no religious privileges is also the fully developed *Christian* state' (Marx and Engels 1974: 117–118, 1975: 111).

made today: that the secular state arose out of the Christian need for religious tolerance and pluralism and thereby as an answer to the tensions between a plurality of Christians and other religious positions (See, e.g., Brett 2009). Or as Marx put it, Christianity itself ‘separated church and state’ (Marx 1975c: 186, 1975d: 198).⁶ What we require is a religious secularism in which (and here the argument folds back to Marx’s initial position) the secular state is the only proper basis of religious tolerance. In order to overcome older practices of religious intolerance and in response to the sheer number of different forms of Christianity, the only viable response is a secular state that favoured no Christian denomination or indeed no religion at all.

But this argument leads to the dead-end of current debates, for it is no advance—apart from asserting the need for one more effort in order to achieve a thoroughly secular state for the sake of religious tolerance. A different line that emerges from Marx’s argument is that the new form of the state does nothing to relieve the contradictions of the old one. The secular state may be an effort to overcome the tensions of the Christian state, but as the full realisation of the Christian state, it still embodies those contradictions within the new form. In short, it is no solution at all. This I suggest is the young Marx’s real contribution to debates in our own time.

4.4 Engels and the ‘Christian King’

A third possible line to follow from Marx’s argument has a different sting in its tail. Before we feel that sting, I would like to bring Engels into our discussion, for in an early piece he makes a strikingly similar argument to Marx. Engels tackles the question of church and state in a rather judicious article from 1843 called *Frederick William IV, King of Prussia* (Engels 1975b; 1985).⁷ His main point is that the efforts of the self-described ‘Christian king’ (always in mocking quotation marks)⁸ to establish a Christian state are doomed to collapse through a series of contradictions. The underlying problem is that the Christian-feudal model the king has in mind is, like theology itself, an ossified relic from the past that will no longer work in a world that has made huge strides in science and free thought—by which I understand Engels to mean not merely philosophy but also democracy, political representation and republicanism. The result is that the king must make a whole series of compromises that doom the effort from the start.

⁶See Breckman (1999: 295–296), who argues that when Marx came to the conclusion that the secular state actually has a dialectical basis in theology, that he saw the inadequacies of liberal, republican arguments for such a state.

⁷See also Engels’s comments in the late letters on Paul Lafargue’s efforts to bring about the separation of church and state in the French assembly (Engels 1968b: 248, 1968c: 239, 2001a: 330, 2001b: 320).

⁸For example: ‘The Prussian King, who calls himself emphatically “the Christian King”, and has made his court a most ludicrous assemblage of whining saints and piety-feigning courtiers’ (Engels 1975c: 530, 1975d: 515).

Now Engels does not find the Prussian king an obnoxious person as such. He credits the king with having a system, even with being kind-hearted and witty. But the king is also a reactionary with an impossible agenda. Engels begins by pointing out that various obvious measures are really the outward manifestation of a deeper problem encouraging church attendance, laws strengthening the observance of Sunday rest, tightening of the laws concerning divorce, purging of the theological faculties, changing examinations to emphasise firm belief, and appointing believers to government positions. The problem is that the Prussian king is caught in a dilemma: the logical outcome of his programme is the separation of church and state, yet he seeks to fuse the two. On the one hand, as the Head of the Evangelical Church, as *summus episcopus*, he seeks to subordinate the church to secular power. Even though he wants to combine ecclesiastical and state power in his own person, to join ‘all power, earthly and heavenly’ so that he becomes ‘an earthly God’ (Engels 1975b: 362, 1985: 431), he is in fact king first and supreme bishop second. On the other hand, such a move runs directly into the wall of Christian doctrine: one’s primary allegiance should be to God and not some temporal power, whether state or king: ‘A person who makes his whole being, his whole life, a preparation for heaven cannot have the interest in earthly affairs which the state demands of its citizens’ (Engels 1975b: 363, 1985: 432). In other words, a full recovery of Christianity means the separation of church and state.

Engels’s argument intersects quite neatly with Marx’s: Christianity itself leads to a separation of church and state, for there is drive towards secularisation within Christianity, especially in light of the endless divergence within it. Any effort at a Christian state must decide what form of Christianity is to be favoured.⁹ Is it to be Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Anglican, Presbyterian, Lutheran, Methodist, Congregational, or ...? The existence of the Orthodox churches in their multiplicity, as well as the event of the Protestant Reformation put the lie to the claim by the Roman Catholics to be the one ‘catholic’ church. Even within the history of the Roman Catholic Church there were numerous schisms and breakaways that were either absorbed and curtailed or expelled as heresies (if you can’t absorb them, crush them). According to this argument, any Christian theory of the state must enable and allow for such diversity. The only way that this can happen is through a separation of church and state: no one form of Christianity can dominate without making a travesty of theology itself.

It seems to me that this argument is implicit in Engels’s exploration of the contradictions in Friedrich Wilhelm IV’s programme. For example, this Prussian king not only recognises both Roman Catholic and Protestant, but he also freed the Old Lutherans from the enforced union in 1817 of Lutherans and Calvinists in the Evangelical Church. With the various Protestant churches now given freedom in their internal affairs, the king struggled to maintain his role as the head of the church. But which church? Is one church to submit to the state-imposed authority of another?

⁹He makes a similar point in his discussion of the Established Church of England and the English constitution in relation to ‘Dissenters’ and the Roman Catholics (See, Engels 1974: 580–581, 1975a: 501).

It is a hopelessly contradictory solution and one unacceptable to the churches themselves. The more Friedrich Wilhelm IV tries to deal with each situation in question, the more confused the whole situation becomes. In the end, these efforts like those that sought to restore feudal privilege in the context of an Enlightenment-inspired basis of Prussian law lead to the collapse of the so-called Christian state through internal contradictions. The solution is a secular state.¹⁰

4.5 Sting in the Tail

A little earlier I suggested that this argument, shared by the young Marx and the equally young Engels, may flick back to sting us. The barb here begins with the point that the secular state arises from and is a response to contradictions within the Christian state. In both Marx's and Engels' different reflections, it is possible to find a logic for the secular state within Christianity. Indeed, they claim that the secular state is the full realisation of the Christian state and the resolution of its contradictions. If that is the case, though, we suggest that the contradictions are not resolved but reshaped. Thus, the tensions between different religious traditions do not disappear, although the ways they now make their presence felt are different from how they appeared in the Christian state. To begin with, the assumption of the secular state that religion is a private affair faces the pressure within many religions for a very public, political expression of their truth claims. Further, tolerance or indifference may be a stated virtue of the state and its various working parts. But it also assumes and in effect tries to require that the religions themselves will operate with a similar level of tolerance towards one another. One need only consider the intolerant, usually conservative elements within each religion to see that such inter-religious tolerance is often maintained with difficulty.

However, the deepest tension of the secular state is rooted in its origins. If we grant Marx's point that the secular state arose as an attempted resolution of the tensions within the Christian state of the nineteenth century, then it follows that secularism cannot escape religion, since religion is the reason the secular state exists at all. In other words, religion and secularism are two sides of the one coin. Look at one side and it says, 'church and state, forever separate'; flip it over and you read, 'church and state, never to part'.

Let me put it in terms of a paradox: the more church and state are separated, the more they seem to be entwined. Of course, the awareness of this paradox comes with some hindsight after a reasonable history of the secular state. For example, in the United States the separation between church and state is, as is well known, enshrined in the First Amendment to the Constitution: 'Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof'. Initially a response to the established Church of England, especially after the American War of Independence, it has come to be interpreted as any act by the

¹⁰The separation of church and state would become standard socialist policy (See, Marx and Engels 1973c: 4, 1977a: 4; Engels 1972: 237, 1990: 229).

Congress and the legislature that favors one religion over another with the possible outcome that such a religion may become established. In practice, this really means Christianity and shows up with monotonous regularity in the area of state-funded education. The Bible is not to be taught, prayer is not appropriate and one cannot teach religious doctrines in state schools.

However, in the United States the separation of church and state has become a legal fiction. The more strictly the courts apply the First Amendment, the more pervasive religion becomes in public life. An external observer cannot help noticing that religion saturates public life in the USA: the founding myth of the escape from oppression to a land of freedom is drawn from the story of the Jewish Exodus and the Promised land, Presidents must be openly Christian, they make decisions with religious concerns in mind, whether on questions of sex education, stem-cell research and same-sex relationships, voting patterns follow religious lines, and, especially in the Bible Belt, there is a sharp polarisation over religion. One is either passionately Christian or passionately atheist. By comparison, states which still have an established church, such as Denmark, or those with only recently disestablished churches such as Sweden, are among the least religiously observant countries in the world.

A very different example of the paradox of the secular state may be found in Turkey. Ever since Atatürk in 1924, the separation of church and state has been central to the constitution of a secular Turkey. All levels of government and state-supported institutions, such as schools, universities, hospitals, police and the army, must operate without influence from the Sunni Muslim majority. However, in Turkey there is a specific government agency, the Department of Religious Affairs, which watches Islam very closely. The content of sermons, statements and views must avoid political content, and, like France, all female state employees are banned from wearing the *hijab*. The state also restricts any independent religious communities and religious schools. At the same time the state supports mosques through taxes and subsidies. In other words Turkey has a situation comparable to the established church in some western European countries. The difference is that the recognition of Islam, even to the point of providing state funds, is designed to negate the effect of Islam in affairs of the state. The state supports religion in order to watch it and maintain the separation of church and state, or rather, mosque and state.¹¹

This state of affairs has been severely tested of late. In 2002 and then again in 2007 the Justice and Development Party (AKP) achieved a majority in the Parliament with Recep Erdoğan as Prime Minister. The party's origins lie in a number of banned parties with explicit Islamic links. The Prime Minister claims that the AKP does not have a religious basis, yet some of its measures, such as relaxing the ban on the hijab and the invocation of Sharia, suggested to many that religion was now infringing on the state. In 2008 the chief prosecutor of the Supreme Court filed a suit with the Constitutional Court, whose task is to protect the secular constitution of Turkey. The court has the ability to ban any party that undermines the principle of secularism at

¹¹ For Talal Asad (2003), secularism is another way for the state, especially in Muslim-majority countries, to control religion.

the heart of the constitution. In July 2008 it found that the ruling AKP had indeed breached the provisions of the constitution, but instead of banning the party (it fell one vote short of the seven out of 11 required to do so) gave it a severe reprimand and cut half of the funding to which it was eligible as a recognised political party. In effect, the court upheld the constitution while avoiding the massive political turmoil of banning a ruling party.

As for Marx and Engels, they were to find in their myriad journalistic pieces—let alone Engels’s later concerns with early Christianity—that the complex issue of religion and politics turns up with a persistence that belies any effort to separate them. It may be the tensions between the Russians, Turks, British and French around the Crimean War,¹² or the French and English revolutions (Marx 1973b: 19, 24, 40–11, 47, 56–17, 81, 87–18, 94, 104, 1978: 55, 60, 77, 83, 92–53, 118, 131, 141; Marx and Engels 1973d: 12, 1978: 254–256), or even the revolutions of 1848–1849. On it goes, with comments on Puritanism in the United States (Engels 1968a: 560, 2004: 74), on Germany (Engels 1979: 14–15, 23–14, 28, 35), Russia (Engels 1973b; 1992), Poland (Marx and Engels 1973b: 321, 338–329, 341–323, 352, 362, 1977b: 339, 356–337, 359–361, 370, 380), Spain (Marx 1980f: 394–395, 402–395, 411, 435–396), Ireland Marx 1973a: 654, 1973f: 543, 1986a: 620, 1988: 4), Switzerland (Engels 1973a: 93, 1977b: 146, 1977d: 183), Hungary (Engels 1977a: 147, 1977e: 469–470), China (Marx 1979c: 93, 1980c: 41–42), India (Marx 1979a: 126, 1979b: 222) and the Slavic countries (Marx 1973d: 25, 1983: 21), on the Holy Alliance (Marx and Engels 1973a, 1977c) or the pope’s dealings in Italy and France (Marx 1980b: 473–474, 1981: 430, Engels 1977c), and indeed Europe in general (Engels and Kautsky 1990: 597–598, 603). It was not for nothing that the ‘religious idea’ (and its relation to social, political and intellectual development) was important enough to be listed as part of the program for the Geneva Conference of 1866 of the International (Marx 1973c, 1973e, 1987a, 1987b).

I would suggest, then, that the persistence of these tensions belies the suggestion that they are occasional anomalies in the separation of church and state. Rather, they are inherent to it. The arguments of Marx and Engels would suggest that such endemic contradictions are the outcome of the origins of the secular state within the contradictory logic of the Christian state more specifically, as a Christian response to the plurality of religions.

4.6 Conclusion

So what is to be done? I would suggest that opposition of church and state, and indeed of religion and secularism, draws the line at the wrong point. One reason why the battle lines are drawn up at this point is the underlying assumption that secularism is a progressive program. Since religion is a regressive and superstitious business, or so the argument goes, a secular program that challenges this repressive

¹²Out of a very long list of such references, in this and following notes I provide a few samples (See, Marx 1986b: 86–87, 1986c: 178, 1991: 120).

system must be enlightening and progressive. But is secularism necessarily progressive? It may well be quite reactionary, as we find in recent examples from conservative politicians in Denmark and the Netherlands. In both places the argument goes as follows: we are a secular country, where gay couples live openly, where nudity is accepted, where women and men have equal rights, and where freedom of speech is protected, so we will not tolerate any religion that challenges those features (and others) of our society. That ‘religion’ is of course none other than Islam. So we find the bits and pieces of an apparently secular society marshalled in opposition to the perceived barbarism and superstition of a particular religion. Needless to say this convoluted position in the hands of conservatives actually justifies a resurgent xenophobia, Islamophobia and religious intolerance.

Perhaps the way forward is to recognise that secularism is not necessarily progressive and that religion is not a default reactionary position. Would it not be wiser to seek the progressive dimension of both so that the concerns of this age and this world might be addressed? Is it not possible that a politics of alliance might develop between progressive elements within various religions and secular movements? Perhaps a ‘new secularism’ is in order in which this politics of alliance takes place. I close with an example of how this might work. At the various anti-capitalist and anti-globalization protests, such as those against the World Economic Forum in Melbourne in 2000 and then again at the G20 meeting in 2006, we found anarchists, greenies, ferals, socialists, feminists, various elements of the loopy left, and some religious groups for whom the protests were perfectly consistent with their convictions.

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