

## MARX ON 'THE OPIUM OF THE PEOPLE'\*

MARX'S experience of religion was very limited. He seems to have had little interest in the religious question, and only turned his mind to it when polemical situations demanded some kind of response. And what he has to say is neither very original nor very profound. In fact, I think it is not unfair to say that we would not need to concern ourselves with Marx's views on religion at all, were it not for the fact that the Communist Party claims to act in his name and find in Marx the legitimation of its own attitudes towards religion. In this way, the ideas of Marx have had massive and often devastating consequences for believers.

Marx's views on religion are best approached indirectly. Marx was not a philosopher, despite the efforts of the Marxists to transform him into one. By this I mean that he distinguished his own enterprise with that of the philosophers: 'The philosophers have interpreted the world: the task is to change it'. That is an anti-philosophical sentiment, and Marx was perfectly consistent on this point.

His rejection of philosophy meant, specifically, the rejection of Hegel. Faced with Hegel's proud system which purported to embrace and embody the whole history of the adventures of the Spirit, Marx's tactic was to say simply that it was nothing more than a mask, a disguise for something else. In Hegel, Spirit objectivises itself, thus lapses into alienation, but recovers by an act of knowledge, of recognition.

Now Marx treats Hegel rather in the manner of a psycho-analyst listening to a patient. He is aware of what the patient is saying, indeed he listens to him with the utmost attention, but all the time he is looking out for the 'words behind the words' which reveal the real nature of the malady. It is not the overt statements which matter so much as the hidden, coded statements, of which the speaker himself is unaware. After listening carefully, Marx comes up with his reading of Hegel. Hegel's metaphysics is not what he thought it was: it is a description, in transposed and veiled language, of the social processes of production. His metaphysics is really economics; the hero of history is not

\*This is the text of an informal talk given by Fr. P. Hebblethwaite to students of The Royal University of Malta as part of the academic celebrations in honour of St. Thomas Aquinas.

Spirit but the labour of men; and Hegel has done no more than produce an allegory of the historical process.

Marx possesses the key to the process of history. He makes this quite clear: 'We recognise only one single science, the science of history' and 'the history of all societies hitherto is the history of class conflict'.

I may appear to be straying from my subject, but in fact I am at the heart of it. The unmasking and interpretation of Hegel provide the model for the unmasking and interpretation of Christianity (or indeed of anything else, one must add). Any 'system' can be read with the key provided by Marx. Except that Christianity is in an even more parlous condition than the metaphysics of Hegel. Hegel can be read as allegory. It contains unintentional truth. But Christianity provides not an allegory but an *illusion*. In his *Contribution to a Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, the word 'fantastic' keeps recurring. Man 'looked for a superman in the fantastic reality of heaven'; 'religion is the fantastic realisation of the human essence'. It follows that the task is to liberate man from the illusion of religion:

'The criticism of religion disillusions man to make him think and act and shape his reality like a man who has been disillusioned and has come to his senses, so that he will revolve around himself and therefore round his true sun. Religion is the illusory sun which revolves around man as long as he does not revolve around himself'.

In Marx, then, the denial of God and the assertion of man are correlative statements. He must deny the illusion in order to assert the reality, proclaim atheism in order to found humanism.

This is why Marx is the most systematic and radical of atheists. His atheism quickly becomes combative, becomes an anti-theism. Not for him the liberal secular view which, with Marx, believes religion to be an illusion, but allows it to continue in the 'private sphere'. Marx does not allow a private sphere, independent of society. So he declares war: 'The abolition of religion as the illusory happiness of the people is required for their real happiness'.

Thus we reach the conclusion of this section of Marx's *Contribution*...: 'Religion is the opium of the people'. It dulls, blunts and eventually destroys the perception of injustice in the world by offering the fallacious hope of happiness and consolation elsewhere, in another world. It alienates, it drugs, it diverts from urgent tasks. This is the essence of Marx's position on religion. It has known little serious dev-

elopment. Engels embellished it with dubious historical inaccuracies, but until the Marxist revisionists or heretics of the late twentieth century, it has remained in its pristine, dogmatic form.

One is forced to ask a number of questions about this interpretation of religion, and in particular Christianity. First, what is the evidence for Marx's assertions? Marx does not provide any, and indeed does not need to. In this he is typical of the ideological thinker: if you disagree with him, this is either because you are a fool or are fooled. Still the question about evidence must be asked. And though it is clear that religion has been used as a form of social control – a way of keeping the oppressed content with their lot – and that God has been exploited as the prop of unjust social orders, it is also true that religion has challenged tyrants in the name of a higher order or a more perfect vision of justice and fraternity. The Church in 19th century Poland and Ireland was oppressed, not oppressing. Bonhoeffer resisted Hitler, Solzhenitsyn resists in Russia today, and Helder Camara is at loggerheads with the government of Brazil. At least Marx might have recognised the *ambivalence* of religion before systematising his mono-theory. Indeed, in another passage, he says that religion is 'the sigh of the oppressed creature' and some later Marxists have used this passage to suggest that the sigh can lead to protest and effective action (Garaudy).

My second question is very simple. Marx's humanism is based on the assumption that God and man are in radical opposition to each other, that what you attribute to the one you must take away from the other, that what you claim for one must be denied to the other. But this supposition is by no means self-evident. The situation changes – and our analysis of it – if one posits that God and man are not in competition, but rather in a state of collaboration. Then one can speak of man as co-creator.

Thirdly, there is a grave danger in Marx's humanism. To say as he does that 'Man is the supreme being for man' is deeply ambiguous. Does this mean man in the concrete, individual men? In which case it is the equivalent of Christianity's inalienable dignity, but without the grounding which Christianity provides. Or does it mean 'man in general'? A whole line of Marxist development has given this second answer and been prepared to sacrifice present generations for the sake of the future, a future, incidentally, which never finally arrives. There is not the slightest sign of the classless society emerging, still less of the withering away of the state. Unspeakable horrors have been perpet-

rated and justified in the name of this principle. It seems that to make 'man the supreme being for man' opens to the door to his abuse and exploitation. The dimension of the more-than-human is needed if man is to be defended.

Finally, and most tragically, Marxism in practice becomes an ideology in precisely the sense reproved and denounced by Marx. The irony is blatant. In communist countries, Marxism is the official ideology, commended by all the media, all embracing, total, totalising and totalitarian, and it is imposed on people and used as the justification for what happens. 'We must not relax our ideological vigilance' says Mr Gierak in Poland. Translate: 'We must not relax our propaganda efforts'. Stalin used ideology to justify the slaughter of the kulaks and the disappearance of millions. They were declared 'enemies of the state' and if they protested, that only proved their guilt the more. Today, they are not shot, but put in mental hospitals. Now all this was only possible because the sceptical, unmasking Marx, the Marx who tore the mask off ideologies, has been conveniently forgotten. This is the point to recall Marx's only recorded joke: 'I am not a Marxist'.

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