Felice A. Bonadio

THE RELIGION OF KARL MARX

As a young man established at Bonn University, Karl Marx had written that "the criticism of religion is the foundation of all criticism." Marx's break from traditional Christianity was partially a product of eighteenth-century scepticism, for even before his university career Marx had learned from the Baron von Westphalen, himself a product of that century, that the Frenchman Saint-Simon wished to have society organized scientifically in the interests of Christian charity.[1] But, more important, Marx began to formulate his ideas on the nature of religion when the shadows of Hegel and Feuerbach lay heavy on German thought. The vital issue was whether religion had made man, or whether man had made religion. If man had made religion, then it was clear that he was capable of making changes that would affect society on a far-reaching basis. To demonstrate that both religion and the state were the products of certain social conditions was to indicate that a change in those conditions would eliminate the necessity for both.[2]

For Marx, religion was the key to the whole of man's social problems, for it played a dual role in the class struggle: it buttressed the established order by suggesting that the political order was somehow ordained by God, and it consoled the oppressed by offering them in heaven what they were denied on earth. In short, religion was "the opiate of the people."[3] The immediate task was to unmask in its secular form what Marx had unmasked in the sacred form. The criticism of heaven would transform itself into the criticism of earth, "the criticism of religion into the criticism of law, and the criticism of theology into the criticism of politics." Sidney Hook has observed, quite correctly, that when Marx wrote that religion was the opiate of the people, his reference was to the *beliefs* of organized religion and the *practices* which followed from those beliefs. Taken together, the *beliefs* and *practices* of traditional Christianity symbolized an ideological enslavement of the proletarian masses to the oppressive machinations of the capitalists and corresponding bourgeois

political organizations.[4] "By sanctifying all the abominations of the capitalist régime with the holy water of religion and by terrorizing their flock with the spectre of punishment in the world to come, the leaders of these organizations serve as the most reactionary units of the class enemy in the camp of the proletariat."[5]

In European political history Marx found evidence for his social argument against religion. He wrote in 1854 that a broad gulf stood between Europe of the nineteenth century and Europe of the thirteenth century, "so fallen away since the latter epoch [was] the political influence of religious dogma." Marx argued that the period from the Protestant Reformation to the eighteenth century had witnessed the unfettering of all religious authority by the upper classes in European society, a process that Marx characterized as "the era of aristocratic revolt against ecclesiastical authority." Then came the era of the French Revolution when the French masses, and soon all of western Europe, revolted against religious dogma in their programme for social and political freedom. This period Marx characterized as "the era of democratic revolt against ecclesiastical authority." Finally, from the Restoration period to the Crimean War, the upper classes had thrown aside their religious scepticism and had "made alliance" with all State ecclesiastical systems. Marx was convinced that in 1853 a world movement was in ferment which foreshadowed a second upper-class current of revolt against religious authority forming a "juncture" with the broad popular current, which "like the Missouri and the Mississippi" would flow in a tide of opinion that would be madness for the ecclesiastical power to encounter.[6]

Marx was critical of religion because he realized that the essential mark of Christianity was its otherworldliness. It placed salvation in heaven, whereas socialism would realize it on earth. As a consequence of institutionalization, all religion had united with the existing order of property relations and was offered to the exploited as an opiate in order to distract attention from the social order of things. So close was the identification between the ruling class and religion that Marx could attack religion itself, and at the same time launch a crusade against the whole complex of social institutions of which religious practices were a part. He heralded the atheistic society, which he believed would soon come into existence, by demonstrating that an atheist could be an honourable man, that man degraded himself not by atheism but by superstition and idolatry.[7] In part, Marx accused traditional Christianity of deliberate mystification. Too often had the religious thinker argued that poverty was a sign of godliness: "The mortgage that the peasant has on heavenly blessings guarantees the mortgage that the bourgeois has on peasant lands."[8]

In 1853 Marx wrote to Frederick Engels that the Frenchman Bernier "rightly considers that the basic form of all phenomena in the East . . . is to be found in the fact that *no private property in land existed.* This is the real key, even to the Oriental heaven."[9] Here again is another indication that Marx's criticism of religion was not a consequence of his criticism of society; rather Marx begins with a critique of religion, which turns out to have social and economic consequences. What the criticism of religion revealed was the fact that the condition of human life was such that man had been forced to create an ideal world in order to make the real world tolerable.[10] The economic argument against religion pictured Christianity as a superstructure for more fundamental social problems. "As to the realms of ideology," said Engels, "which soar still higher in the air, religion, philosophy, etc., these have a prehistoric stock, found already in existence and taken over in the historic period, of what we should today call bunk." Thus, the low economic development of the "prehistoric period" proved the main driving force for the "primitive nonsense" of religion.[11] It was, above all, Marx's contention that the great struggles of history have all been at bottom economic, even when they have been fought in religious or political terms. What Marx suggested was that the form and substance of religion was, at bottom, an expression of man's economic interests, a thought-projection of the conditions appropriate to a particular class-structure of society: "It is not the consciousness of man that determines their existence, but, on the contrary, it is their social existence that determines their consciousness." Marx's criticism of private property, as set forth in his *Critique of Political Economy*, was essentially an attack upon vested interest in accord with the political theory implicit in the Christian gospel. In the final analysis, then, Marx believed that man's conception of the soul and immortality has always been influenced by his economic environment. This is why Marx wrote that the religious world is "but the reflex of the real world."[12] He meant that the determining influence of material conditions is the basic conception of all religions. Great transformations in economic conditions, therefore, occasioned changes in religious conceptions and values similar in quality to the changes in political and social thought. What was religion, then, but a "fantastic reflection of human things in the human mind — a product of the mind relative to the economic environment of any given time in the historical process." What happened was that man had made the mistake of explaining his actions from "thought" instead of from need, and so "there arise[s] in the course of time that idealistic outlook on the world which, especially since the decline of the ancient world has dominated men's minds."[13]

From this point of view the final causes of all social change are sought, not in divine truth and justice, but in changes in the modes of production and exchange. They are to be sought not in the *religion,* but in the *economics* of each particular epoch. Marx's conviction that existing social institutions were unreasonable and unjust was his proof that in the modes of production and exchange, changes had taken place with which the social order, adapted to earlier economic conditions, was no longer in keeping. The means for getting rid of the incongruities in society was not a matter of deduction from fundamental principles, but was to be found in the existing system of production.[14] Religion, then, in this argument was at bottom an economic question, a reflex of the real world in the sense that economic need has occasioned false ideas of nature which usually corresponded to the degree of economic development in any given stratum of society.

In both his political and his economic argument against religion, Marx postulated the formula that "Man makes religion, religion does not make man." Hence, the gods are personifications of the powers that dominate human life. When the powers no longer dominate man, there will no longer be gods. This is how Marxism hopes to abolish religion. But, in order to account for religion in the first place, Marx assumes from the outset that religion is false. In his materialism, Marx argued that since matter is the primary reality, there cannot exist the possibility of a god or gods. Marx inherited his materialism from Feuerbach, who had said that being precedes consciousness; not consciousness, being.[15] By "being," Marx and Feuerbach both meant "all that is"; and the "assertion of the primacy of being becomes materialism because of the belief that everything is a more or less complicated organization of atoms."[16] Since everything can ultimately be explained in terms of matter in motion, religious explanations of any sort are excluded. "Motion," wrote Engels, "is the mode of existence of matter. Never anywhere has there been matter without motion, nor can there be." Matter without motion was just as unthinkable as motion without matter. Motion was, therefore, as uncreatable and indestructible as matter. "A motionless state of matter is therefore one of the most empty and nonsensical of ideas—a 'delirious phantasy' of the purest water."[17] Marx, then, conceived of religion as an explanation of natural phenomena which served as an alternative to scientific explanation.

"My method of development is not Hegelian," Marx argued, "since I am a materialist and Hegel is an idealist. Hegel's dialectic is the basic form of all dialectic, but only after it has been stripped of its mystical form, and it is precisely this which distinguished my method."[18] Here was the essence of Marx's scientific argument

against religion, a definite inheritance of Hegel's rationalism in that religion is attacked because it does not accord with *a priori* canons of rationality. In a passage from *Capital,* Marx writes that religion will disappear only when "the relations between human beings in their practical everyday life have assumed the aspect of perfectly intelligible and reasonable relations as between man and man and as between man and nature. The life process of society, this meaning the material process of production, will not lose its veil of mysticism until it becomes a process carried on by a free association of producers, under their conscious and purposeful control."[19] In a sense Marx assumes that there is some standard of rationality and intelligibility to which human relations should conform. Since religious beliefs do not accord with these standards, they are false. Through its symbols, myths, and images, religion has failed to conform to the canons of rationality that even Hegel, despite his mysticism, had found most objectionable in Christianity.

In short, Marx was an empiricist. His dialectic was not opposed to scientific method but only to pseudo-scientific philosophies and religion, which ignored the battles won by reason in physical or biological investigation and sought to apply their findings to other realms (the supernatural) without conforming to scientific standards. "Darwin's book is very important," Marx wrote, "and serves me as a basis in natural science for the class struggle in history. Despite all deficiencies, not only is the death-blow dealt here for the first time to 'teleology' in the natural sciences, but their rational meaning is empirically explained."[20]

At this point both Marx and Engels saw all religion as the "fantastic reflection" in men's minds of those external forces which controlled their daily lives, a reflection in which the terrestrial forces assume the form of supernatural forces. "In the beginnings of history it was the forces of Nature which were at first so reflected, and in the course of further evolution they underwent the most manifold and varied personifications among the various peoples." But before long, Marx argued, those social forces became active side by side with the forces of Nature, which presented themselves to man as equally extraneous and at first equally inexplicable, dominating them with the same apparent necessity, as the forces of Nature themselves. "The fantastic personifications, which at first only reflected the mysterious forces of nature, at this point acquire social attributes, become representatives of the forces of history. At a still further stage of evolution, all the natural and social attributes of the innumerable gods are transferred to one almighty god, who himself once more is only the reflex of the abstract man."[21] This, in essence, is what might be termed Marx's psychological argument against religion, that is, religion as the self-projection of

man in society. God here is viewed as the fantastic and ideal projection of man caught in the life process of society. The argument was distinctly an inheritance from Hegel and Feuerbach.

The Hegelian idea of "alienation" (*Entfremdung*) was a fundamental concept in Hegel's account of mind. By "alienation" he meant a condition in which man's own powers appeared as self-subsistent forces or entities which controlled man's actions. Feuerbach also made use of the notion of alienation in his *The Essence of Christianity,* for he set out to show that the essence of religion was the essence of man himself, projected outside himself and personified: "The powers and capacities attributed to the gods were in fact man's own powers and capacities; the divine law was nothing but the law of man's own nature."[22]

Marx, in his *Theses on Feuerbach*, started from the position that Feuerbach had reached. But the problem of alienation was no longer viewed by Marx as a philosophical issue (*i.e.*, a dispute about the essence of man). Alienation was examined as a social phenomenon. Again, human *needs* constituted the starting-point for all of Marx's inquiry, yet not the abstract needs of Feuerbach, but the primary needs of production, reproduction, and communication. "Feuerbach resolves the religious essence into the human. But the essence of man is not an abstraction residing in each single individual. In its reality it is the whole of social relationships."[23] And again: "Feuerbach does not therefore see that the religious feeling is itself a *social product,* and that the abstract individual whom he analyses belongs in reality to a specific form of society."[24] Where Feuerbach had found the essence of religion to be rooted in the human feelings of dependence upon the external forces of the natural and social world, Marx argued that the real force which impelled men to turn their eyes toward heaven — where they could enjoy what was denied them in life — was not merely psychological but social.

Marx asked in what circumstances men project their own powers and values upon hypothetical, superhuman beings and what are the social causes of this phenomenon? It is here that Marx's own psychology of religion comes into view. Marx believed that the source of religion is to be found in the antagonism between the way men actually produce and the legal, moral, and social form under which that production is carried on — "or between the new needs generated in the course of their social Praxis and the old needs which give rise to, and yet oppose, the new needs."

> Feuerbach takes his point of departure from the fact of religious self-alienation, from the splitting up of the world into a religious, imaginary world and a real one. His achievement consists in dissolving the religious world and revealing its secular founda-

> tions. He overlooks the fact, however, that after completing his work the chief thing still remains to be accomplished. The fact that the secular foundation lifts itself above itself and fixates itself as an independent empire beyond the clouds can only be truly explained in terms of the internal division and contradictions of this secular foundation.[25]

Religion, according to Marx, is sought in the real conditions of man's empirical life and in the class conflicts that occur in society, and not in his essence. "And if these conditions are such that they generate certain kinds of emotional conflicts and theoretical illusions, then these illusions and conflicts must be removed by removing that which gives rise to them . . . . If Feuerbach claimed to have discovered the secret of theology in anthropology, Marx sought to transform anthropology into realistic sociology."[26]

"Religion is the opiate of the people" was not a reference to the necessary precondition of criticism that would awaken the people from their stupor. Marx argued that the political and social movement of the working class must not be "explicitly or programmatically anti-religious." The working-class movement, according to Marx, must, in the first instance, "be directed against the *milieu* whose social antagonisms are eased through the cultural opium (religion) dispersed by those classes which control the means of production, education and communication."[27]

What did Marx substitute for the religion he abandoned? In his *Theses on Feuerbach*, Marx wrote that "social life is essentially *practical*. All mysteries which mislead theory into mysticism find their rational solution in human practice and in the understanding of this practice."[28] This intellectual and practical program which Marx formulated in 1843 had its origin in Saint-Simonian doctrines that Marx had studied even before he became acquainted with Hegel. His aim was to transform speculative philosophy into a critical social theory that men (meaning the proletariat) could use to overcome their misery. The problem was that of alienation, the separation of man from himself and from his neighbours. Here was the fundamental evil of capitalist society, the divorce between man as a citizen and man as a worker. Marx regarded the objective of the socialist movement as a society in which men, liberated from the "alienations" of capitalist society, would be the masters of their own destinies, through their understanding and control of Nature and through their own social relationships. The ideal was characteristically that of the nineteenth-century theory of progress.

"The standpoint of the old materialism is 'civil society'; the standpoint of the new materialism is *human* society or socialized humanity."[29] What did Marx mean

by "socialized humanity"? On one level, he was referring to the political, economic, and social equilization of the classes, literally interpreted.[30] But, more important, "socialized humanity" meant the necessity for a "social art." "Only then will the last extraneous force which is still reflected in religion vanish; and with it will also vanish the religious reflection itself, for the simple reason that then there will be nothing left to reflect."[31]

The "social art" was nothing more than the vision of the good society which one finds in Christianity; Marx, however, makes this vision concrete. For Marx, both good and evil are inextricably bound together, and they are greater than anything of either good or evil that individuals may will. As MacIntyre has noted, the rejection of the Christian religion has led Marx into a version of pre-Christian religion, "a Gnostic antithesis of ultimate good and penultimate evil."[32]

The standpoint of the old materialism assumed that each individual was a God-given independent whole with private interests. The standpoint of the new materialism is the standpoint of the *human* society because it claims that what any man is must be explained in terms of what all men are like. What discredited religion for Marx was that its mystifications concealed a truth about human community, the truth being that "there is no more to God than a hypostatization of human relations."

Here was no religion of humanity. Marx had no liking for "Positivist rot." "As a party man I have a thoroughly hostile attitude toward Comte's philosophy, while as a scientific man I have a very poor opinion of it."[33] Socialized humanity was another way of expressing the theory that the nature of man is not a biological fact but a social one, and that the point of departure is human need. The function of socialized humanity was to bring human beings to self-consciousness, "not the mystical self-consciousness which for Hegel was the end of all history, but a class consciousness arising from concrete needs." Morality, then, for Marx, is natural. There is no possibility of ethics based on divine revelation. Morality is social, and all mystic and personal intuitions about the nature of "good" are irrelevant. Morality is also active, for it is based upon needs, upon what man as a social creature desires. "Communists," wrote Marx, "do not preach morality. They make no moral demands upon people such as 'Love one another.' " What was rational for Marx was class morality, for it was aware of its own irrational roots. It defined the good in relation to class needs.[34] "Socialized humanity" did not mean the destruction of individuality, but made it a value accessible to all.

NOTES

1. Edmund Wilson, *To the Finland Station* (New York, 1940), p. 113.
2. Edward H. Carr, *Karl Marx, A Study in Fanaticism* (London, 1934), pp. 15-16.
3. T. B. Bottomore, *Karl Marx, Selected Writings in Sociology and Social Philosophy* (London, 1956), p. 27.
4. Sidney Hook, *From Hegel to Marx* (New York, 1936), p. 155.
5. Karl Marx, "Ideologies Among the Working Class Inimical to Communism," reprinted in Emile Burns, *A Handbook of Marxism* (New York, 1935), pp. 1023-24.
6. Karl Marx, "The Decay of Religious Authority," reprinted in Burns, *op. cit.*, pp. 177-79.
7. Karl Marx, "On the History of French Materialism," reprinted in Frederick Engels, *Ludwig Feuerbach* (New York, 1941), p. 85.
8. Karl Marx, *The Class Struggle in France* (International Publishers Co., n. d.), p. 85.
9. Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Selected Correspondence, 1846-1895* (International Publishers Co., 1942), Marx to Engels, London, June 2, 1853, p. 66.
10. Alasdair C. MacIntyre, *Marxism, An Interpretation* (London, 1953), p. 84.
11. Engels to Conrad Schmidt, London, October 27, 1890.
12. Karl Marx, *Capital* (Modern Library ed., New York, 1932), Vol. I, p. 91.
13. Frederick Engels, *Dialectics of Nature* (New York, 1940), p. 289.
14. Frederick Engels, *Socialism, Utopian and Scientific* (New York, 1935), p. 54.
15. Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity* (New York, 1957), pp. 2-12.
16. MacIntyre, *op. cit.*, p. 82.
17. Frederick Engels, *Anti-Duhring*, reprinted in Burns, *op. cit.*, p. 237.
18. Marx to Kugelmann, London, March 6, 1868, in *Correspondence, op. cit.*, p. 234.
19. *Capital*, Vol. I, p. 79.
20. Marx to Lassalle, London, January 16, 1861, *Correspondence, op. cit.*, p. 125.
21. Engels, *Anti-Duhring, op. cit.*, p. 300.
22. Bottomore, *op. cit.*, p. 4.
23. Karl Marx, *Theses on Feuerbach*, reprinted in Frederick Engels, *Ludwig Feuerbach* (New York, 1935), pp. 40-45.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 46, Thesis VII.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 47, Thesis IV.
26. Hook, *op. cit.*, p. 292.
27. *Ibid.*, p. 293.
28. *Theses*, VIII.
29. *Theses*, X.
30. *Correspondence*, Marx to Engels, London, December 14, 1868, *op. cit.*, p. 259.
31. Engels, *Anti-Duhring, op. cit.*, p. 301.
32. MacIntyre, *op. cit.*, p. 89.
33. Marx to Franckel, London, May 13, 1871, *Correspondence, op. cit.*, p. 312.
34. Hook, *op. cit.*, p. 53.