

Christianity: Another Way of Interpreting Marxism

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Editorial note: The quotations of Marx and Engels in this article are sourced from *Marx and Engels Collected Works* and Marxists Internet Archive (<https://www.marxists.org>) respectively. Their citations are embedded in the text, as opposed to other footnote-references.

Regarding the Marxist view on Christianity, quite a number of people associate it with the “dispute between theism and atheism”; the comparison to “the opium of the people”; and the slogan, “the abolition of religion.” No doubt most Communist countries have taken a hostile stance against religion. To quote S.A. Smith: “As children of the Enlightenment, the Bolsheviks sought to raise the cultural level of the masses, which essentially meant raising educational standards, disseminating scientific knowledge, and opposing religion and superstition.”¹

Nie Qing, a scholar in China, noted that, as early as 1842, Karl Marx had recognized that “religion in itself is without content, it owes its being not to heaven but to the earth, and with the abolition of distorted reality, of which it is the theory, it will collapse of itself.” (“Letter from Marx to Arnold Ruge” [November 30 1842]; in *Marx and Engels Collected Works*, Vol. 1, 393-395).²

Yet Marx’s and Engels’ views on religion are more complicated.

¹ “Towards A Global History of Communism,” in Smith S. A., (ed), *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Communism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 28.

² Nie Qing (聶清), “Marxist View on Religious Art: A Multi-Dimensional Vision,” in *Studies in World Religion*, issue No.3, June, 2018, (Beijing: Editorial Department of Studies in World Religions), 2.

Marx and Engels: their religious upbringing

There was a historical reason why Marx and Engels could not but criticize religion, in particular, Christianity. V.G. Kiernan wrote that “Marx and Engels began their thinking about society in a Germany where, as Engels said later, straightforward political activity was scarcely possible, and progressive aspirations found vent largely in criticism of orthodox religion, that buttress of the social and political order.”³

The young Marx and Engels, however, were full of Christian passion. Shi Chuansheng, a Marxist scholar in China, wrote, “Engels’ father was the owner of a factory and a devoted Christian. In this religious family, Engels was brought up in a domain of religious education.”⁴ Another scholar, Zhang Guangming, noted that “the young Karl Marx excelled in religion, German and Latin.”⁵ One of the outstanding religious compositions might be his high school thesis (1835): “Reflections of a Young Man on The Choice of a Profession.” Marx wrote in the thesis:

History calls those men the greatest who have ennobled themselves by working for the common good; experience acclaims as happiest the man who has made the greatest number of people happy; religion itself teaches us that the ideal being whom all strive to copy sacrificed himself for the sake of mankind, and who would dare to set at nought such judgments?

Shi Chuansheng inferred that this exemplary person was Jesus Christ.⁶ According to Shi, Engels received confirmation at the age of 16, and was totally immersed in religious passion. In about 1837,

³ Cf. “Religion,” in Bottomore, T., (ed), *A Dictionary of Marxist Thought*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1983), 465.

⁴ Shi Chuansheng (施船昇), *Marxist View on Religions and its Related Approaches* (Chengdu: Sichuan Peoples’ Publication House, 1998), 40.

⁵ Zhang Guangming (張光明), *The Life of Marx* (Beijing: Communist Central Party School Publication House, 1998), 5.

⁶ Shi, op. cit, 41.

he wrote in a poem: “my lord Jesus Christ, son of God, please come down from your throne to save my soul.”⁷

Marx and Engels: a definition of religion

A commonly accepted Marxist definition of religion is the following: “All religion, however, is nothing but the fantastic reflection in men's minds of those external forces which control their daily life, a reflection in which the terrestrial forces assume the form of supernatural forces.” (Engels, *Anti-Dühring* [1878], Part III, ch 5)

Actually in *Comments on the latest Prussian Censorship Instruction* (1842), Marx pointed out, “Thus the instruction wants to protect religion, but it violates the most general principle of all religions, the sanctity and inviolability of the subjective frame of mind.” Marx presented here a very different description of the contents of religions: the sanctity and inviolability of the subjective frame of mind.

No doubt, Marx and Engels stuck to their judgment that “man makes religion, religion does not make man.” (Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right: Introduction* [1844]) And Engels also said: Religion by its very essence drains man and nature of substance, and transfers this substance to the phantom of the otherworldly God, who in turn then graciously permits man and nature to receive some of his superfluity. (“A review of *Past and Present*, by Thomas Carlyle” [1844])

The above were views from juvenilia. In his mature thinking, Marx came to develop a more balanced point of view. In 1863 he wrote,

[The development of capitalist production] ... is as truly cosmopolitan as Christianity. This is why Christianity is likewise the special religion of capital. In both it is only men who count. One man in the abstract is worth just as much or as little as the next man. In the one case, all

⁷ Ibid.

depends on whether or not he has faith, in the other, on whether or not he has credit. (Marx, *Theories of Surplus Value*, manuscripts)

In this passage, Marx pointed out two important qualities of Christianity: all people are equal and all depends on faith.

A comparison of the rise of Christianity and Communism

Interestingly, Engels always compared the rise of socialism with that of early Christianity. To the question: why, with the enormous concentration of landownership under the Roman emperors and the boundless sufferings of the working class of the time, which was composed almost exclusively of slaves, socialism did not follow the overthrow of the Roman Empire in the West? Engels answered, “this ‘socialism’ did in fact, as far as it was possible at the time, exist and even became dominant—in Christianity.” (*On the History of Early Christianity*, [1894-95])

He also wrote:

In fact, the struggle against a world that at the beginning was superior in force, and at the same time against the novators themselves, is common to the early Christians and the Socialists. Neither of these two great movements were made by leaders or prophets—although there are prophets enough among both of them—they are mass movements. (ibid.)

But in spite of the similarities between the early Christian and modern worker movements, for Engels there is a significant difference:

The history of early Christianity has notable points of resemblance with the modern working-class movement. Like the latter, Christianity was originally a movement of oppressed people: it first appeared as the religion of slaves and emancipated slaves, of poor people deprived of all rights, of peoples subjugated or dispersed by Rome. Both Christianity and the workers' socialism preach forthcoming salvation from bondage and misery; Christianity places this

salvation in a life beyond, after death, in heaven; socialism places it in this world, in a transformation of society. (ibid.)

Certainly Christianity aims at “a life beyond, after death.” In the Gospel according to John, Jesus states twice that “my kingdom does not belong to this world.” (18:36) Early Christians, however, did not neglect this world. In 1882, Engels singled out the universality of Christianity:

People of two different religions (Egyptians, Persians, Jews, Chaldeans) could not eat or drink together, perform any every-day act together, or hardly speak to each other. It was largely due to this segregation of man from man that the Orient collapsed. Christianity knew no distinctive ceremonies, not even the sacrifices and processions of the classic world. By thus rejecting all national religions and their common ceremonies, and addressing itself to all peoples without distinction, it became the *first possible world religion*. (“Bruno Bauer and Early Christianity”)

He went on to compare Christianity with the Socialist Workers Movement:

Both are persecuted and baited, their adherents are despised and made the objects of exclusive laws, the former as enemies of the human race, the latter as enemies of the state, enemies of religion, the family, social order. And in spite of all persecution, nay, even spurred on by it, they forge victoriously, irresistibly ahead. Three hundred years after its appearance Christianity was the recognized state religion in the Roman World Empire, and in barely sixty years socialism has won itself a position which makes its victory absolutely certain. (*On the History of Early Christianity*, 1894-95)

The Sacrifice of the founders of Christianity and Communism

Significantly, Marx and Engels appreciated the commitment and sacrifice of religious leaders. Regarding Jesus Christ, they always kept a very positive comment. Engels wrote,

Christianity, therefore, clearly expressed the universal feeling that men themselves are guilty of the general corruption as the consciousness of sin of each one; at the same time, it provided, in the death-sacrifice of his judge, a form of the universally longed-for internal salvation from the corrupt world, the consolation of consciousness. (“Bruno Bauer and Early Christianity,” 1882)

The apostles of the early Church also sacrificed their privilege of being a circumcised Jew (cf. Romans Ch.3-4). Engels elaborated:

Judaism, too, with its new universal god, had made a start on the way to becoming a universal religion; but the children of Israel always remained an aristocracy among the believers and the circumcised, and Christianity itself had to get rid of the notion of the superiority of the Jewish Christians (still dominant in the so-called Book of Revelation of John) before it could really become a universal religion. (“Bruno Bauer and Early Christianity,” 1882)

Even though Marx and Engels did not agree with the world views of religious people, they deeply admired the spirit of sacrifice of the religious leaders.

On opium and the comforting force of religions

Regarding the oft-quoted statement, “religion is the opium of the people,” Marx was actually quite neutral in his argument. He wrote:

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. (Marx, *Contributions to a Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right*, Introduction, 1844)

Marx’s saying, “religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature,” in fact echoes St. Paul’s in his letter to the Romans,

For the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labour pains until now. (8:20-22)

Opium in the 19th Century was a medicine. But due to the Opium War, it acquired a negative connotation in the mind of the Chinese people. Marx himself did not attach any negative judgment to it. He described "religious suffering" as "a protest against the real suffering." It revealed his deep sense of humanity.

According to Fr. Matthew Yuan Ting-tung, S.J., Marx failed to grasp the true meaning of religious comfort. Marx lacked a concept of transcendental God. So he saw religion as a kind of worldly palliative. Whether religion is opium or not depends on its functions. Is religion a replacement for worldly pain-relief agents or does it address a real human need?⁸

Engels indeed did not deny the comforting power of religion. According to Professor Chen Lidan, a scholar in China, "When people suffer, are tired and it is impossible to change the fate, religion then becomes a spiritual need. Engels wrote that when religion truly becomes an enterprise of the spirit, even when one is on the brink of pain and despair, it always serves to strengthen and comfort the people."⁹

Conclusion

Karl Marx considered religion a means of suppressing the people. Religious leaders frequently use, or allow others to use religion to oppress, or defend an inhuman social environment. Fr. Yuan even welcomed the critique and encouraged believers to reflect on it. He wrote:

⁸ Yuan, Matthew (袁廷棟), *Critical Study on Marxism* (Taipei: Guangqi Press, 1988), 126.

⁹ Chen Lidan (陳力丹), *On Communication of Spirit: the View on Communication by Marx and Engels* (Beijing: Kaiming Publication House, 1993), 118.

Using a religious motive (the will of God) to justify or back up our own desire and opinions, is commonplace and ardent, ... Marxist criticism of this tendency awakens us: a perpetual dependence on religion diminishes our openness to the Lord. In some places in Europe, the Catholic Church's association with capitalists as well as her misguided views about private property have earned the distrust of the working class.

Fr. Yuan, however, pointed out that Marxists committed similar mistakes as Christians did in the past. "Atheist Marxism ... turn relative values into absolutes, making their ideology an absolute truth; as a result many people have been sacrificed."¹⁰

If we put aside the dispute between Christians and Socialists on theism, the Catholic Church and Socialism have many opportunities for cooperation that could benefit humanity. The Second Vatican Council affirmed,

For our part, the desire for such dialogue, which can lead to truth through love alone, excludes no one, though an appropriate measure of prudence must undoubtedly be exercised. We include those who cultivate outstanding qualities of the human spirit, but do not yet acknowledge the Source of these qualities. We include those who oppress the Church and harass her in manifold ways. Since God the Father is the origin and purpose of all men, we are all called to be brothers. Therefore, if we have been summoned to the same destiny, human and divine, we can and we should work together without violence and deceit in order to build up the world in genuine peace. (*Gaudium et spes*, 92)

In the afterword to *Marx's Concept of Man*, Eric Fromm likewise concluded that Christianity and Marxism share a good foundation to work together:

In spite of the fact that Christian and Marxist thinkers do not share identical views—there are sharp differences between the two groups—it is perfectly clear that there is a

¹⁰ Yuan, op. cit., 127-8.

common core of thought and feeling that unites them: humanism.¹¹

Actually even some scholars in Communist China affirmed that the conflict between Marxism and religion are avoidable. Chen Cunfu wrote,

Why had Marx not written any specific criticism of religion, and only late in life did Engels write three articles on Early Christianity? Because the revolutionary targets of the capitalist class was feudal society during the middle ages. Christianity absolutely ruled Europe in the Middle Ages, so the capitalist enlightenment movement without exception denounced Christianity, scholasticism, and church hierarchy; whereas the Socialist-Communist movement that Marx and Engels took part in, took aim at capitalist regime and its ideology. Religion became a concern only when it became a hindrance to the revolution.¹²

Tang Xiaofeng assented: Marx already acknowledged that even for the countries where political liberation have been achieved, religions not only existed, but was flourishing. This proves that religion and the attainment of the state are not contradictory.¹³

My article reviews Marx's and Engels' understanding of religion. The Marxist concern with the suppressed class (class struggle seems forever unavoidable) is full of religious undertones, including even aspects of Christianity. Thus, to better understand Marxism, a better understanding of Christianity is unavoidable.

¹¹ Fromm, Erich, *Marx's Concept of Man* (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1966).

¹² Chen Cunfu (陳村富), "The Forming Locus and the Basic Idea of Marxist Atheism," in *Studies in World Religion*, issue No. 3, June 2017 (Beijing: Editorial Department of Studies in World Religions), 6.

¹³ Tang Xiaofeng (唐曉峰), "Marxist Criticism on Religion and its implication to the Contemporary Atheistic Education," in *Studies in World Religion*, issue No. 4, August 2017 (Beijing: Editorial Department of Studies in World Religions), 5.