

Some Reflections on “Science and Religion”

By René Gilbert

Commentary

Li Shen, the author of “*Science and Religion: A Brief Discussion*,” is a scholar at the Institute of Religious Studies at the Academy of Social Sciences in the People's Republic of China. Mr. Li's interpretation of history is typically Marxist. It is important for the reader to understand this while reading his very interesting article and the commentary below.

Li Shen's article, “*Science and Religion: A Brief Discussion*,” is interesting in that it possibly gives an opening for a dialogue between Marxists and religious believers. In it Mr. Li avoids the old bromide that categorizes religion as an opiate intended to dull the masses of oppressed people from facing their present situation and denying them the will to change it. On the contrary, he sees a role for it in the new socialist high tech society. He admits that the new technology brings many advantages to science and can also be beneficial to religion. In fact, his opinion is that high technology offers a new "gospel" to religion that can enable it to adapt its teachings to it, and through it find its place and value in society. This is a come down from the high position religion once held as the dominant ideology in society. Science has now replaced it as the new dominant ideology. Religion's role now is very limited. He says: "Religious organizations will sooner or later find their place in society. As they discover their role, they can rely upon their organizational skills to teach people that God's will consists in wanting human beings to strive for ever higher goals." He calls this the new "Moral Religion". The author recognizes that religion is a social phenomenon, but it is also quite clear that he is convinced that the God or gods it believes in are only a fabrication of the human mind. (Observe how often he-uses the term “Man-made religions.”

Religion's social role, in the author's opinion, is to teach and encourage human beings to believe in the high destiny that socialist society is creating. Everyone should cooperate in this great enterprise.

His point is also interesting because it touches on a truth that finds different expressions in various religious beliefs. Christian faith firmly holds that God wants human beings "to strive for ever higher things," to use the author's words. According to this belief each human person clearly has a destiny that begins in this world and continues on into a new world, the new heavens and new earth to use biblical terminology. The author mentions Vatican II in his article as reinstating scientists who had fallen out of favor in past ages. If he had read the document on the Church in the Modern World, he would have discovered that the Catholic Church, which he mentions more than once in his article, has a very great interest in this world, that a new and just society should be created through the cooperation of all men and women of good will. He would have found out, perhaps to his surprise, that the church considers this to

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be one of the major duties not only of its own believers but also a duty incumbent on the whole human race. The author, of course, would part company with believers when it comes to the question of a life after death, but he cannot deny that believers can be as committed to this world as any good Marxist. This, too, can be a starting point for a mutual dialogue.

The author makes many assumptions in his article that need to be seriously examined. His Marxist view of the origin of religion, for example, although containing valuable insights, is far too facile and does little to explain the very complex issue of humanity's religious consciousness. His assumption that religion is purely a man-made phenomenon in fact begs the question; it assumes the truth of the very point he wishes to make. Another assumption is that the most important human needs are material ones and that once these are satisfied, the person is satisfied. Granted the importance of

material needs, plus the fact that they act as an engine for human progress and that people are forever looking for better means of satisfying them, human beings are still too complex to define them solely or even predominantly by their materiality. The author speaks at some length of morality in his article. Is the moral sense something that can be broken down into purely material elements? The article sidesteps this question. The matter is too crucial to accept the author's thesis point blank.

It is interesting to note that the author gives religion a role to play in the development of science and even encourages religion to develop some of its aspects. This, however, is a very minor role. He states that on the whole religion does not encourage the progress of science, but in reality, tends to inhibit it. Many scientists that have deep religious convictions would protest this claim. The author writes them off by saying that religion, and

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thereby scientists that believe in religion, cannot but accept new scientific achievements, but find it impossible to admit all the conclusions that will follow from them. In his opinion it is inevitable that religion turns them into immutable dogmas, or worse, twists scientific achievements into "magic" (the original word used, strangely, is "sorcery") and uses them to its own advantage. These accusations are, in boxing terminology called "hitting below the belt." He offers no substantial evidence for his blanket denial that religious people can be true scientists. He also claims that scientists who held on to their scientific convictions were always persecuted like Galileo. He sees this as endemic to the nature of religion especially when it was the dominant ideology in society. He maintains that persecution always follows when scientific findings contradict religious teachings. It would take more than a few pages to answer these charges. One needs a true historical perspective where ideological positions do not cloud the issue. There have been and there are instances where scientists and scholars were persecuted for their views. This has happened owing to the ignorance and stupidity of religious people as well as to oppressive political regimes clinging to their own power and privileges. However, there have been and are

scientists of high renown whose religion in no way compromises their science or their religion. The author is reading history with glasses heavily dusted with Marxist ideology.

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The author constantly speaks of "religion" and "science" and depicts them as foreordained adversaries. These two terms are abstractions; they do not exist in the spatial and temporal world. There are people who are religious believers, who are scientists, or artisans, or tram drivers, etc. You will not meet "religion" or "science" walking city streets. This does not deny the validity of abstractions. It is the ordinary human way of thinking and is not peculiar to Marxist philosophy. Abstract thought is

only true in so far as it corresponds to the real world. The correspondence is not totally due to the nature of human thought. The author would do well to pay attention to the oft-quoted saying of Deng Xiaoping, "Seek truth from facts." Deng was a first class pragmatist. What is the point being made here? Our philosophical constructs, theories and such are valid in so far as they connect with and reflect the real world. The danger in the opposite point of view is subjectivism—this is the attempt to make reality conform to our own ways of thinking and judging. In other words, people constantly face the danger of constructing a perhaps logical but fictitious system that is mistaken for reality. The author's apotheosis of science will find it difficult to avoid being seen as a logical construct, having little to do with the real world. For example, in the third section of his article, he speaks of science as one would speak of the deity. He sees the error of equating science with religion, but his paean of science certainly approaches a "religious" fervor that sounds strange in the mouth of a Marxist philosopher. People have no need for divine saviors; science is the only savior.

But what is this abstraction "science"? The author distinguishes between the natural sciences and the social sciences. All of these are valid ways of approaching, understanding and controlling reality. They have enabled humanity to make great strides in improving life and raising cultural levels. No one with an open mind doubts this. On the other hand science, rather some scientists,

have brought great evil upon the world, as the author readily admits. However, he is reluctant to lay these crimes at the door of “science” itself. In his eyes science is a sacred cow. He differentiates between science and its offshoots technology and industry. These latter two are responsible in his opinion for the environmental and moral damage the world suffers. However, it is not science, technology or industry—again abstractions—that create these evils, but people—scientists, technicians, industrialists, and yes, even people who believe in religion.

The author in his concluding section affirms morality. Atheists are moral people and, in his opinion, lead better lives than religious believers. Be that as it may, this affirmation of a moral sense in humanity also opens another avenue to dialogue. He paints a hopeful and ideal picture of human life: humanity needs a morality, a destiny, a purpose, and a sense of nobility and self-sacrifice that brings joy and peace. However, his conclusion ends on a dismal note. He speaks of Russel’s *History of Philosophy* where Russell praises the noble and high-minded spirit of Socrates as he conversed with his two friends, just before dying. The author adds his comment on this scene. “However, if he (Socrates) knew that death ends in nothing and after dying he could no longer discuss philosophy with his friends he would even be more noble and high-minded.” This is nihilism with a moral underpinning, but still nihilism. It runs counter to the deepest movements in the human heart that seeks fulfillment even beyond the grave. This shows up the arrant poverty of a philosophical system that promises so much but terminates with a whimper.

