TOWARDS A POSITIVE MARXIST CRITIQUE OF RELIGION

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Recently, there has been a revival of interest in the Marxist critique of religion,[1] partly because Marx's own views have been seen to be more complex than was once thought and partly because of the continuing relevance of Marxism to the social explanation of religion. Nonetheless, the critical analysis of the Marxist critique of religion remains in a parlous state. Apart from the tendency of Marxist *epigoni* to repeat Marx's formulations without analysing the difficulties inherent in his substantive views, there is no adequate recognition of the hiatus between Marx's insights and his inadequate grasp of the phenomena to which they need to be applied. Instead, it needs to be admitted from the outset that there is no consistent Marxist critique of religion, that Marx's own formulations are imprecise and possibly inconsistent, that Engels and Lenin took a different path and that Marx's whole problematic needs to be reconstructed in the context of an empirically informed analysis of *religions*, which does not confuse religion as such with the transcendentalism characteristic of only some religions, and on the basis of a psychology and a sociology which is more sophisticated and testable than the fragmentary indications which Marx himself provides.

This paper, then, is an attempt to pave the way for such a reconstruction by exploring the question of whether certain elements of a more positive Marxist critique of religion can be found in Marx himself. It is not an attempt to theologise Marx or to attribute to him a sympathy for religion which he clearly lacked. This paper is concerned with the implications which can be drawn from Marx's arguments *contra* his own emphasis and intentions. It is an attempt to show that the problem of the nature of human projectivism, and the possible socio-economic determination of its manifestations, is at the heart of Marx's critique of religion, and may be open to a more positive resolution than Marx himself provides.

Marx wrote relatively little about religion. Yet he managed to comment on a wide variety of problems from the social character of natural religion as an 'animal consciousness' of the all powerful forces of nature, to the nature of Hinduism, without however clarifying the question of whether his remarks at different periods reflect fundamental modifications in his general views. If we bracket this problem for the purposes of this paper, it is possible to focus on central assertions in Marx's critique of religion which are relevant to the possibility of a more positive Marxist critique of religion.

I.

Firstly, Marx argues that religion is a form of human self estrangement, an objectification of man's own humanity which has become alien to him and capable of influencing his behaviour in a heteronomous manner.[2] Religion, Marx declares, is the illusory sun around which man revolves as long as he does not revolve around himself.[3] Heaven and the supreme being are only reflections of man: religion is precisely the recognition of man in a round about manner; that is, through an *intermediary*.[4] It is man's alienated self consciousness, the self consciousness and self esteem which man has as long as he has not yet found himself or has already lost himself again.[5] Through religion, man loses his own humanity to an objectification which is itself the product of his own activity. The more humanity man puts into God, Marx argues, the less he puts into himself.[6]

This formulation however gives religion an astonishingly positive status. It is no longer mere illusion or error, but man's humanity in an alienated form. Marx himself was reluctant to allow the positive implications of this argument, and stressed against Hegel that man's true self consciousness was not to be found in religion, but in its sublation (*Aufhebung*).[7] Yet the implication remains, and Marx himself spoke of socialism as the return of man to himself from religion and of socialism as man's *positive self consciousness* no longer mediated by the annulment of religion.[8] But even granted the implication that true humanity is to be found after religion is sublated, and that it is conditioned by new communist social relationships, the fact remains that religion can be described as the revelation of man's humanity in an alienated form. Moreover, under Feuerbach's influence, Marx argued that religion was the *fantastic realisation* of the human essence (*Wesen*) which has no true reality.[9] Here Marx's words are open to one of the strongest interpretations of the positive content of religion to be found anywhere. If religion is the fantastic realisation of the not yet actualised human essence, then it might follow:

(1) that religion provides a possible source of knowledge about what that essence is;

(2) that religion is futuristic *vis-a-vis* the manifest forms of the historical process, both because the human essence has not yet been actualised in them, and, more controversially, because the human essence is not yet complete and preappears in religion when it still only possesses a weak degree of development in man himself, and

(3) that religion contains a certain finality in relation to the present form of the human essence, which is not absent from it, but receives its fantastic realisation in it.

Marx himself would probably have recoiled from this interpretation of his words, and have emphasised that religion was only the *fantastic* realisation of the human essence *which had no true reality*, even perhaps the fantastic realisation of the human essence as it was now.

Moreover, Marx stressed against Feuerbach that there was no abstract 'human essence', that the human essence was only the ensemble of social relations, and that 'religious feeling' was always a social product.[10] Later he went even further and argued that the 'essence' of religion was not to be found in any 'essence of Man' but in the material world which was already in existence.[11] Nonetheless, despite Marx's own emphases, it is difficult to exclude entirely a futuristic element from Marx's initial formulation, and Marx's stress on locating the human essence within a given system of social relations does not necessarily mean that religion is entirely reducible to manifest social forms. On the contrary, if religion is the manifestation of the not yet actual human essence, then religious projections are not *simply* reflections of the existing world, but reflections of it which embody contents not yet found in the existing world in a developed, manifest form. Equally, to the extent that Marx claims that in revolutionary periods future relations of production are present as impeded tendencies, it might be thought that the impeded future might also be reflected in such projections: that still futuristic social relations would appear in them. Indeed, this would seem to be required by the history of fantastic anticipations of communism which emerged in societies in which communist social relations were certainly not present. Hence when Marx observes:

> *It is, in reality, much easier to discover by analysis the earthly core of the misty creations of religion than, conversely, it is to develop from the actual relations of life the corresponding celestial forms of those relations. The latter method is the only materialistic, and so the only scientific one.*[12]

he omits an important element. It may be that it is difficult to develop the celestial forms from the actual relations of life because the actual relations of life do not yet include in a manifest form what preappears as the content of the celestial forms.

Moreover, the same implication arises in Engels, whose recursive bias is even stronger than that of Marx. Engels' development of the anthropological interpretation of religion is almost entirely negative; religion is man's emptying out of himself, his renunciation of his humanity which he has poured into a phantom being. Nonetheless, Engel admits that men arrive at 'a kind of content' in religious projections, at least as long as their belief is 'strong and living'. Indeed, Engels concedes that the strong faith of the Middle Ages had so much content that it lent 'a significant energy to the whole epoch'. Engels subverts the point by emphasising that this content of course already 'lay in human nature', but then allows it by conceding that at the time when this content appeared in religious projections in such an energetic, epoch-shaping form, it was 'still unrecognised, still underdeveloped' in man himself.[13]

Secondly, in now over-famous words, Marx asserts that religion is the opium of the people,[14] the illusory *happiness* which consoles and comforts them in their sufferings. But Marx elucidates this claim

in ways which again give religion a remarkably positive status. Religion, Marx goes on, is 'the heart of a heartless world', 'the sigh of a distressed creature', a protest against misery, and, most important of all, 'the spirit of a spiritless condition'.[15] Clearly there can be no simple normative move for Marx from religion to the 'heart' and 'spirit' which need to be realised in a humanised world. Still, it is difficult to avoid the implication that religion does provide a problematic analogical indication of a possible true content: an indication of 'heart and 'spirit' which are needed and lacking in the real world, in which however they would need to assume a corrected, no longer alienated form. Indeed, for all his emphasis on religion as *alienated* and not true self consciousness, Marx himself seems to admit a loose analogy between the 'imaginary flowers' of religion and the 'living flower' or that which is needed:

> *Criticism has plucked the imaginary flowers from the chain, not to enable man to wear the existing chain without fantasy or consolation, but to make him cast off the chain and pluck the living flower.*[16]

The 'happiness', 'heart' and 'spirit' of man's human existence will not be the 'happiness', 'heart' or 'spirit' of religion, but there is a certain continuity of genus, as indeed the word 'alienated' itself implies.

Thirdly, Marx argues that religion is an inverted world consciousness which reflects the inverted world (of men, the state, society) which produces it.[17] But this again implies that religion has a certain 'truth' in relation to this inverted world. Hence there is a certain ambiguity in Marx's remark:

> *Religion is the general theory of that world, its encyclopedic compendium, its popular logic, its spiritual 'point d'honneur', its enthusiasm, its moral sanction, its solemn complement, its general ground of consolation and justification.*[18]

since religion may not simply be a false general theory of that world, but a real guide to the relationships actually found in it, 'its encyclopedic compendium', 'its popular logic'. Moreover, it is far from clear in what form religion 'reflects' the world that produces it. Marx himself equivocates between:

(1) the reductionist claim that the religious world is but 'the reflex' of the real world,[19] which opens up the possibility that the falsehood in religion is found in the world;
(2) the claim that religion inverts the real world and misrepresents it; and –
(3) the more Hegelian insight, expressed more clearly in his critique of earth than in his critique of heaven, that religion and the real world are not separate or absolutely distinct, since the inverted world consists of a dialectical unity of consciousness and base, and not a dualism of consciousness and reality, as some of Marx's *dicta* seem to imply.

Marx does not concern himself with the problem of mediation within such 'reflection', but to the extent that it is implicit, in Marx's more Hegelian utterances, it could follow that religious projections contain mediations not reducible to the 'real world' which they reflect.

Fourthly, Marx held that religion was declining and would eventually disappear. He set however rather stringent conditions for its demise:

> *The religious reflex of the real world can . . . . . only vanish, when the practical relations of everyday life offer to man none but perfectly intelligible, reasonable relations with regard to his fellow men and to Nature.*[20]

It hardly seems likely however that 'perfectly intelligible, reasonable relations' between man and man, and between man and nature will be achieved easily or quickly, and there is no obvious guarantee that they would continue in such a pristine state even if they were achieved. But this opens up the possibility, *contra* Marx, that religion may, in a sense, be both 'normal' and non-abolishable, at least in the foreseeable future, or might even *reappear* after it has 'vanished', if 'perfectly intelligible reasonable relations' with regard to man and nature cease to obtain. Here a trick of phrasing highlights what is so unsatisfactory in Marx's whole critique of religion. Because Marx does not distinguish between religion as one transcendent form of projectivism and man's need to project from present reality in general, he tends to confuse the criteria for the overcoming of religion with the hopelessly utopian criteria for overcoming human projectivism, criteria which are manifestly lacking once defects in human social relations or in man's relation to nature or in man's relation to the as yet unrealised aspects of his human essence are admitted. Moreover, Engels falls into a similar difficulty. Engels argues that religion is a fantastic mimetic reflex of the real heteronomy under which man finds himself, in the first instance the forces of nature, and subsequently the extraneous forces of production:

> *All religion, however, is nothing but the fantastic reflection in men's minds of those external forces which control their daily life, ...*[21]

Engels goes on to argue that as long as man is under the heteronomy of either natural or social forces, the basis for the religious reflex, and hence the religious reflex itself, will continue to exist. Here, Engels conflates the heteronomy model which Marx used to explain 'natural religion', or the earliest manifestations of religion as a primitive response to the heteronomy of the apparently all-powerful forces of nature, with the model to be used to explain developed manifestations of religion, and forgets that in Marx even 'natural religion' was determined by the form of primitive society.[22] He therefore provides possible grounds for the persistence of religion not present in Marx. For Engels, the problem of the heteronomy of natural forces is solved, and it is already possible to envisage a socialist society in which the forces of production will no longer confront man as an extraneous force:

- 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 there will be nothing left to reflect.[23]

But once again this means that religion may not be abolishable in the foreseeable future, unless a socialist society is conceived as instantaneous, that religion could subsequently reemerge if the means of production ever again became extraneous to man, if the forces of nature again became heteronomous, or turn out to be heteronomous still (the problem of ageing, death).

II

Finally, Marx makes three important moves, against religion, each of which also contains the elements of a more positive critique.

Firstly, Marx shifts the focus from the critique of religion itself to the critique of the world in which religion arises. Marx argues against Feuerbach that it is not enough to resolve religion into its secular base: it is also necessary to understand why this secular base 'separates itself from itself and establishes an independent realm for itself in the clouds', to grasp that this phenomena can only be explained by the self-contradictory character of the secular basis, and to revolutionise this secular base so that it is no longer self-contradictory.[24] Marx himself implied that the critique of heaven led to the critique of earth, but was distinct from it, and indeed in the case of Germany essentially complete.[25]

It is possible, however, to draw different conclusions from Marx's position. Marx's materialist turn actually undermines the traditional approaches to the critique of religion, including the criticism of religion which he suggested had been essentially completed in the case of Germany. If it is true, as Marx claims, that religion arises from the defective, self contradictory character of the secular base, then the traditional critique is inadequate, and in some ways misguided when it attempts to explain religion:

(1) as intellectual falsehood, the result of bad reasoning and wrong premises;

(2) in terms of the credulity, ignorance and superstition of men;

(3) as an imposture maintained by a professional clerical caste out of interest; or –

(4) as functional error arising out of the needs of princes, society or the state.

Marx's move implies that religion has a certain inevitability or at least lawfulness as long as such conditions obtain, and that it arises from objective rather than subjective causes, and not out of free but mistaken decisions of men. It implies that the traditional kind of criticism of religion is likely to prove ineffective as long as such conditions continue to exist, and that the true overcoming of religion follows from the activity which transforms the secular basis, not from the idealist criticism of religious ideas and institutions.

But this in turn raises the possibility that the transposition of earthly realities into the clouds cannot be entirely overcome in the period in which the task of transforming the secular base is being undertaken, and may indeed penetrate to the projections of revolutionaries themselves, as a result of objective causal influences. If so, the real question for a positive Marxist critique of religion becomes how to make meta-religious use of the tendency to project earthly conditions into a non-actual beyond, rather than simply to repress such projections, or to imagine that they have been overcome by the refutation of religious doctrines.

Secondly, Marx moves against religion by treating it as epiphenomenal. Marx does not think that religion is entirely epiphenomenal, since in other contexts he allows it a certain causality, but for Marx religion is epiphenomenal to the extent that religion is determined by phenomena outside itself: by the dominant mode of production, by the socio-economic structure of the society in which it is found. Hence for Marx the history of religion is to be explained in terms of socio-economic developments and in terms of the changing interests of social classes.[26] Conversely, other phenomena are not to be explained by religion: the secret of the religion of the Jew is to be found in the actual Jew, the secret of the actual Jew is not to be found in his religion,[27] but in the place which he occupies in the socio-economic structure of society. But if the content of religion is to be explained from outside religion, then it is possible that the negativity of that content results from the negativity of the conditioning factors, and not from religion itself. This is not Marx's own view, because for him religion is the result of such negativity in the conditioning factors. But if it could be shown that religion is one expression of human projectivism, which itself is an enduring and in no way merely negative human tendency, then the question arises whether the projectivism in religion could be put to better use if different determining causal factors obtained.

Thirdly, Marx makes a devastating, if less than original case for the negative character and function of religion. For Marx, religion postulates phantoms, non-existent entities and realms, and treats as actual possibilities, possibilities which have no basis in reality. It also prevents men from understanding and changing the reality which does exist. Religion mystifies human existence; it elaborates false causal schema and postulates an illusory transcendence which deflects men's energy, attention and activity from the real world in favour of a non-existent 'beyond' (*jenseits*). It is ideology and conceals from men the real problems and tasks which confront them, and offers pseudo-solutions to pseudo-problems and also to real problems. By encouraging men to depend on divine assistance, it reduces their capacity to control and shape the world about them. Moreover, it reconciles men to the world in which they suffer, which it sanctions and justifies, and encourages men to be resigned and to submit passively to divinely ordained authority, undermining their will to change it with promises of compensatory happiness in a future world.[28] Again, for all its ethical trumpeting, it is consistent with

brutality. Indeed, Marx quips that 'the animal religion' is the most consistent manifestation of religion.[29] Moreover religion perverts the natural relationships and proportions of human life, repressing important human qualities such as sexuality and transposing them into a heavenly mode.[30] Finally, religion desecrates man: it robs him of his humanity and dignity and renders him slavish and sheeplike.[31] Here it is possible to challenge Marx's making of religion the subject of causality (using his own arguments), to emphasise his animus and bias, to document his lack of knowledge and treatment of certain forms of religion as paradigmatic. Nonetheless, Marx's case for the negative character and function of religion can be interpreted more positively (*contra* Marx) as a judgment on religion, which can be related to the religious critique of religion which runs from the prophets to Karl Barth. Marx's attack opens the way for an empirical investigation of the extent to which religion is permeated by falsehood and mystification, and tends in practice to have harmful, debilitating or perverting effects, which is strictly linked to the socio-economic conditions in which religion takes this form. But this opens up the possibility that Marx is right, in some measure, in characterising religion thus far as inauthentic and harmful, but is premature in reducing religion to the forms which it has taken under the determining influence of negative socio-economic realities which Marx himself strove to render changeable.

These elements of a more positive Marxist critique of religion are only a beginning, but they serve to render visible central problems – the need to determine the specificity of religion, the need to clarify how religious projections are related to human projectivism generally, and the need to discover whether the content of religion is separable from the forms in which it has manifested so far – which any future Marxist critique of religion needs to face.

Notes

[1] See, for example, A.T. van Leeuwen's Gifford Lecture, published as *Critique of Heaven* (Lutterworth, 1972) and *Critique of Earth* (Lutterworth, 1974), and D.E. McKown, *The Classical Marxist Critiques of Religion: Marx, Engels, Lenin, Kautsky* (Martin Nijhoff, 1975); and the very useful anthology of Marx's writings on religion, published as Volume V of The Karl Marx Library, *On Religion*, edited by S.K. Padover (McGraw Hill, 1974).

[2] *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, in *Karl Marx, Frederick Engels Collected Works* (Lawrence and Wishart, 1975), Vol. 3, pp.274. All references are to this edition unless otherwise indicated.

[3] *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law, Introduction*, (1844), in *Collected Works*, Vol. 3, p.176.

[4] *On the Jewish Question*, (1844), in *Collected Works* Vol. 3, p.152.

[5] *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law, Introduction*, (1844) in *Collected Works*, Vol. 3, p.175.

[6] *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* in *Collected Works*, Vol. 3, p.272.

[7] *Ibid*, p.339.

[8] *Ibid*, p.306.

[9] *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law, Introduction* in *Collected Works*, Vol. 3, p.174.

[10] *Theses on Feuerbach*, (1845), 6 and 7, in the Addenda to *The German Ideology* (Progress Publishers, 1968), pp.666-7.

[11] *The German Ideology, op. cit.*, pp.170-1.

[12] *Capital*, I (Lawrence and Wishart, 1970) p.372-3, note 3.

[13] F.Engels, 'The Condition of England *Past and Present* by Thomas Carlyle London, 1843' in *Deutsch-Französische Jahrbücher (1844)* in *Reader in Marxist Philosophy* edit. by H. Selsam and H. Martel (International Publishers, 1968), p.235; cf. the translation in *Collected Works* Vol. 3, pp.461-2.

[14] *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law, Introduction*, (1844) in *Collected Works*, Vol.3, p.175.

[15] *Ibid.*

[16] *Ibid.*, p.176.

[17] *Ibid.*, p.175.

[18] *Ibid.*

[19] *Capital*, I, *op. cit.*, p.79.

[20] *Ibid.*

[21] F. Engels, *Anti-Dühring*, (1878), (Progress Publishers, 1969),p.374.

[22] *The German Ideology, op. cit.*, p.42, cf. the useful discussion in D.B. McKown, *The Classical Marxist Critiques on Religion: Marx, Engels, Lenin, Katsky, op. cit.* pp.23-31 and 71ff.

[23] F. Engels, *Anti-Dühring, op. cit.*, p.376.

[24] *Theses on Feuerbach*, (1845) 4, in the Addenda to *The German Ideology, op. cit.*, p.666.

[25] *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law, Introduction*, (1844) in *Writings of Young Marx on Philosophy and Society* (Anchor, 1967) edit. by L.D. Easton and K.H.Guddat, p.249; cf. *Collected Works*, Vol. 3, p.175.

[26] See, for example, *Capital*, I, *op.cit.*, pp. 79,82; Marx to Engels, June 2, 1853, in Marx-Engels, *Selected Correspondence* (Foreign Languages Publishing House n.d.), p.99, *The German Ideology, op.cit.*, pp.170-1, and Marx's editorial in the *New York Daily Tribune*, Oct. 24, 1854 in *Reader in Marxist Philosophy, op.cit.*, pp.240-242.

[27] *On the Jewish Question* (1844) in *Collected Works*, Vol.3, p.169.

[28] These theses are implicit in the sarcastic, highly critical references to religion scattered throughout Marx's writings; see however, *The Critique of the Gotha Program* (Foreign Languages Publishing House n.d.), p.35 and *The Holy Family* (1845) in *Collected Works* Vol. 4, pp.69ff, 108.

[29] Marx to Ruge, 20th March 1842 in Vol.V. of The Karl Marx Library, *op. cit.*, p.231.

[30] *The Holy Family* (1845) *op.cit.*, pp.65, 170, 173.

[31] See, for example, 'The British Rule in India' in Marx-Engels, *On Colonialism* (Foreign Languages Publishing House n.d.) pp.397-8, and *Capital*, I, *op.cit.*, p.52.