

or to the kind of symbolism that a crucifix or flag could provide. And, of course, I think that Trent was right to do this, even though I regard its decrees as now a museum-piece and efforts to revive them (like *Mysterium Fidei*) as futile and dangerous. Looseness of fit: we are seeking to understand and to confront a complex and vulnerable past, and we are all very complex and unexpectedly vulnerable people. We must move carefully; but we must move. We probably shall not end by agreeing, but just have to agree to differ. No matter—in fact, a good thing, if we keep minds keen to learn and a love that does not palliate division but accepts it and still loves. Which, after all, is one of the things the Eucharist is about.

Marx on the Religious Illusion

by John Maguire

Marx spent most of the years 1843 and 1844 in Paris, having been expelled from Germany. During this period he produced three essays, two on the Jewish question and one on Hegelian philosophy in Germany, as well as the more famous *Paris Manuscripts*.¹ My aim in this essay is to present a puzzle which arises about the argument which Marx proposes in these writings as to the relation of religion and politics, and to suggest a possible partial explanation and some possible implications of the occurrence of this puzzle.

We may start by making clear Marx's intention in the writings in question, particularly the three essays. He is concerned to warn the Jews against those who say: 'Give up your religion, which marks you off from all of us; you cannot merit the privileges of modern political life unless you agree to shed your religious distinctiveness, at least where your politics is concerned.' Marx tells the Jew to inquire carefully into the real conditions of life in modern society. If he does so he will see that shedding his distinct religion will in no way help him to overcome the defects of his real, concrete existence: he will still live a narrow, isolated life, in enmity rather than co-operation with his fellows. This sphere in which we live our concrete, day-to-day existence, Marx calls Civil Society, and he contrasts it with the State, or political sphere; together, the two spheres go to make up what I shall call 'modern society'. This name refers not precisely to any actual historical society but to an 'ideal type' to which post-Revolution France and the post-Independence United States of America would be close empirical approximations.

¹All published in T. B. Bottomore (ed. and trans.): *Karl Marx: Early Writings* (London, 1963). Page references to this volume are given in the text by the letter B followed by the page number in question. To facilitate internal reference without repetition, I have numbered my quotations by a symbol such as (Q 1). The writings are discussed in some detail in David McLellan: *Marx before Marxism* (London, 1970), and more thoroughly in my forthcoming *Marx's Paris Writings* (Dublin, Gill and Macmillan, 1972).

Not only does Marx tell the Jews that to give up their religious identity in return for the harsh realities of civil society is to make a very bad bargain indeed. He goes on to say that the ideas which dominate thought in the political sphere—the ideals of liberty, equality and fraternity—are illusions which will, unless dispelled, trap the unwary into ignoring their condition. Marx argues that in modern society:

‘man leads, not only in thought, in consciousness, but in reality, in life, a double existence. . . . He lives in the political community, where he regards himself as a communal being, and in civil society where he acts simply as a private individual, treats other men as means, degrades himself to the role of a mere means, and becomes the plaything of alien powers.’ (B 13) (Q 1)

In this manner the ideas prevalent in the political sphere distract us from the facts of our concrete existence, and prevent us from undertaking its revolutionary transformation, by presenting men and society to us as being everything positive which in reality they are not. Marx’s advice to the Jews can thus be presented as follows: ‘You are being asked to ignore your religion at least in so far as concerns politics: to become politically emancipated from religion. But suppose that you followed this advice; what would then be your position? Your real day-to-day existence in civil society would be selfish and stunted—in short, inhuman. Thus you would have made no progress towards being fully developed human beings. You are being blinded to this prospect because the very political principles in whose name you are exhorted to renounce your religion are themselves illusions. Their function¹ is that of making enslaved, unequal and egoistic men believe the comforting lie that they are in fact free, equal and truly communal beings. To give up your religion for these principles is to sell your birthright for a sham, while at the same time to condemn yourselves to the concrete, inhuman reality of the negative face of modern society, the real conditions in civil society which are the truth hidden by the political sphere and its illusions.’

By what standard, we may well ask, does Marx judge the reality of civil society to be inhuman? The standard is man’s essential *species-being*; fortunately, we need here give no more than an heuristic idea of the meaning of this term, as standing for the unique really possible form of community in which man will have become fully developed as human person and social being. It is only in communist society, which ‘is the solution of the riddle of history, and knows itself to be this solution’ (B 155), that man’s *species-being* will be fully realized. In any pre-communist society, that is, in any ‘historical’ society, our life-experience is less than it can and must be. It is in the context of this notion of *species-being* that we can understand the

¹The word ‘function’ here connotes merely a recurring *effect* of the presence of illusions; it does not imply the fulfilling of some purpose intrinsic to the social system or elsewhere located.

role of illusion. Only in communist society, where the project of human fulfilment has been achieved, can there be harmony rather than contradiction between men's real existence and their ideas about themselves: only there will illusion be unnecessary and impossible, since there will be no inhuman real conditions of existence for our ideas to contradict.

This theoretical explanation of the role of illusion clearly raises many profound questions for the logic and methodology of the human sciences. Do illusions enter men's minds without their consciously adopting them *qua* illusions? If not, and human consciousness is somehow involved in the genesis as well as in the 'practice' of illusion, are illusions taken on consciously by each man for himself, or are they administered by a cunning elite to a (necessarily or contingently) unwitting mass? These and other possibilities and questions are raised in the case of religious illusion by Marx's impressive but untidy argument that:

'religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the sentiment of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people. . . . Religion is only the illusory sun about which man revolves so long as he does not revolve about himself.' (B 43-44) (Q2)

We shall not, however, focus directly on these topics in the present discussion. This is because our concern is not with the nature and validity of Marx's explanation of illusion as such. Our question is one which arises in its own right once we take for granted the general validity of Marx's theory of illusions: it is the question of the conditions for the occurrence of one or other of the two specific forms of illusion, religious and political, which are central categories in Marx's argument.

Marx, as we have just seen, regards religious consciousness as a form of illusion. We may ask ourselves what is the inhuman form of concrete existence to which religion stands as does political illusion to life in civil society. Marx's answer to this question is indicated in his claim that:

'the political state, in relation to civil society, is just as spiritual as is heaven in relation to earth.' (B 13) (Q3)

The explication of this argument requires some advertence to Marx's interpretation of the transition from feudal to modern society and of his concept of political revolution, by which the transition is effected. In feudal society, there is an immediate unity between the public and private dimensions of life: the day-to-day existence of the feudal subject is enveloped in the cosy but constricting political culture represented by the person of the lord. The germs of both man's communal nature (which will emerge, albeit in illusory form, in the politics of modern society) and his private activity (which will be the principle of civil society) are present within feudal society,

but no more synthesized or active than two dormant volcanos, each ready to explode in its separate direction: the explosion is triggered by the political revolution, which:

‘abolished the political character of civil society. . . . It set free the political spirit which had, so to speak, been dissolved, fragmented and lost in the various culs-de-sac of feudal society; it reassembled these scattered fragments, liberated the political spirit from its connexion with civil life and made of it the community sphere, the general concern of the people, in principle independent of these particular elements of civil life.’ (B29) (Q4)

As we have already seen, feudal and modern society, being both historical societies, are essentially the same in Marx’s eyes in that both are societies of non-species-beings. This absence of species-being is both a necessary and a sufficient condition for the occurrence of illusion in each form of society. The mental life of feudal man is informed and dominated by illusory religious conceptions, just as that of modern man is by illusory political conceptions. Religion stands to that impoverished unity which is the whole of man’s earthly life experience in feudal society, as does political illusion to modern man’s inhuman concrete experience in civil society: it blinds him to the imperfect reality, and thus hinders his pursuing its active transformation. One of the best ways to grasp Marx’s argument is by seeing it as a case of a structure (inhuman reality/illusory consciousness) which remains essentially the same under the transformation of secularization, with the terms heaven and earth being replaced by the terms state and civil society. The force of ‘spiritual’ in the quotation 3 is the same as that of ‘illusory’ as I have used this latter. When Marx tells us that the relations between heaven and earth and between the state and civil society are equally illusory, he is saying that the transformation wrought by the political revolution is no more than the replacement of one form of inhuman concrete life by another and the replacement of religion, the celestial politics, by politics, the secular religion.

Another way to present Marx’s argument is to say that the contradiction between heaven and earth is the same as that between state and civil society. (Here contradiction has not simply the meaning that two terms (e.g. concrete existence and political illusion) are in conflict, but also the further meaning, typical of Hegelian thought, that the two terms will ultimately be ‘aufgehoben’ or ‘sublated’: that is, united in a synthesis where the essence of each term will be preserved and realized.) Marx tells us that:

‘the difference between the religious man and the citizen is the same as that between the shopkeeper and the citizen, between the day-labourer and the citizen, between the living individual and the citizen. The contradiction in which the religious man finds himself with the political man, is the same contradiction in which

the bourgeois finds himself with the citizen, and the member of civil society with his political lion's skin.' (B 14) (Q5)

It is here that there arises the puzzle which I referred to at the start of this essay. As we have already amply seen, if we divide social phenomena into two broad and crudely named classes, 'concrete conditions of life' and 'illusion', religion is firmly on the 'illusion' side of the ledger. Whatever the precise explanation which Marx's theory proposes of the link between the two classes, religion is a form of illusion rather than one of the conditions of life for which illusion acts as a veil. But now we find in this last quotation that, in modern society, religion has somehow mysteriously run around the back of the page and come out on the 'concrete conditions of life' side of the ledger. (In discussing this quotation we must firstly forestall a potential confusion. 'Citizen' refers to modern man in so far as he is a member of the *political sphere*, that is, in so far as he is *not* a member of civil society.) What Marx is doing is giving a representative list of the different aspects and possible forms of being a member of civil society (shopkeeper, day-labourer, living individual, bourgeois) and saying that all are in the same kind of contradiction with man's illusory role as a citizen. The puzzling thing is that Marx ranks being religious in modern society as a phenomenon on the same level, involving man in the same contradiction with his political self, as being a shopkeeper, bourgeois and so forth.

One aspect of this puzzle can be cleared up quite easily. It is plausible, and quite well in accordance with historical fact, to say that religion has been 'demoted' from its throne by political revolution, rationalist criticism and so forth, and that its place as the dominant illusion has been taken by political ideology. It is thus not surprising that, in modern society, religion should be intimately bound up with man's concrete existence in civil society, and no longer be a matter of general and public concern:

'It has become the spirit of civil society, of the sphere of egoism and of the *bellum omnium contra omnes*. It is no longer the essence of community, but the essence of differentiation. . . . It has been relegated among the numerous private interests and exiled from the life of the community as such.' (B 15) (Q 6)

The weakness in Marx's identification of the contradiction of religious man and citizen with the other contradictions in question here can be illustrated by an examination of the following impressive but rather cryptic bit of reasoning:

'if we find in the country which has attained full political emancipation, that religion not only continues to exist but is fresh and vigorous, this is proof that the existence of religion is not at all opposed to the perfection of the state. But since the existence of religion is the existence of a defect, the source of this defect must be sought in the nature of the state itself.' (B 9-10) (Q 8)

The argument of the first sentence is valid, by virtue of the very

meaning of the words involved. With regard to the second sentence, however, we must examine the sense in which religion is a 'defect'. We will find that religion differs in two important relevant respects from the other defects characteristic of man's existence in civil society. Firstly, religion, far from being a phenomenon proper to modern society, is much rather a 'survival' or 'hangover' from pre-modern forms of society. Secondly, religion is a phenomenon of man's conscious life (in the sense of his ideas about himself and his world) rather than an element of his concrete life experience:

'religious alienation as such occurs only in the sphere of *consciousness*, in the inner life of man'. (B 156) (Q 9)

If we now consider quotations 5 and 8, we will see that Marx is arguing that religion stands in the same relation to political illusion, to the sphere of the state, as do the aspects of man's concrete existence in civil society. But we have just seen that religion is a phenomenon of consciousness rather than an aspect of concrete existence, and is a hangover from feudal, rather than a defining characteristic of modern, society. If this is the case, then we must recognize that religion is a 'defect' in modern society quite unlike the other 'defects' with which Marx conflates it in quotation 5. There would be a strong plausibility about the following argument, which Marx could well propose:

The state presents itself as a sphere of really developed species-beings;

But the existence of, for example, day-labouring in civil society shows that the state's claims are merely illusory;

The fact that such phenomena as day-labouring occur in modern society is not accidental: it points to the illusory, partial and unreal character of the political sphere—'the nature of the state itself'.

But the persistence of religion in modern society does not point at all in such a direct manner to the nature of the state itself. This may be brought out by asking ourselves whether we could more easily imagine modern society without day-labouring or without religion. Quite clearly, day-labouring *as such* is not a defining characteristic of modern society. Equally clearly, however, the class of which it is a member (shopkeeper, bourgeois, day-labourer, etc.) is such a defining characteristic: the occurrence of some members of that class is an internal property of modern society, and no mere accident. Marx has, however, nowhere suggested that the existence and persistence of religion is such a property of modern society. In his terms, we could quite easily imagine modern society without any religion at all: this is, indeed, the point which he is making to the effect that politics has become the 'new religion'. Because the class of aspects of concrete existence in civil society is a necessary property of modern society, the existence of these aspects (or 'defects') shows in a direct and stark manner the untruth of political illusion: they are what I shall call direct falsifiers of political illusion. The point

which I am arguing about religion, and which I claim that Marx's argument gets wrong, is that religion is no more than an *indirect* falsifier of political illusion. I may illustrate the distinction in the following way:

(i) *Direct falsifiers*:

(a) the political sphere claims that man is free, equal and communal;

(b) man's concrete existence in civil society shows directly that this is not so;

(ii) *Indirect falsifiers*:

(a) the political sphere suggests that man is free, equal and communal;

(b) we know, from previous analysis of feudal society, that religion is the kind of illusory consciousness which a man could not have were he a fully developed species-being;

(c) thus the persistence of religion in modern society is in itself enough to show that the claims of the political sphere are illusory.

The important point here, as emerges in argument (ii), (b) above, is that religion is a phenomenon of the same type as politics, rather than one which (in whatever manner, we do not discuss) 'gives rise to' political illusion.

Conclusion

I may begin this conclusion by noting some of the questions which this analysis raises about Marx's ideas on religion. It is important to note that, while the writings which we have been considering are in the rather unweighty form of newspaper articles and unpublished notes, they are in fact the *locus classicus* for Marx's views on religion as such. On this topic, Marx nearly always presents conclusions rather than arguments. There is no evidence that he ever underwent any religious crisis: unlike Engels, who outgrew religion with some personal suffering, Marx appears never to have been either inclined or obliged to grapple with the question of a personal faith. This is perhaps not unrelated to the fact that in his system of ideas he starts, both logically and chronologically, from the assumption that religion is illusory:

'thus the criticism of heaven is transformed into the criticism of earth, the criticism of religion into the criticism of law, and the criticism of theology into the criticism of politics.' (B 44)

Although Marx had much to say throughout his life on the subject of religion, it is chiefly, in fact almost solely, in these writings of 1843 and 1844 that he discusses religion as such, rather than using it to draw some analogy with a secular problem, or in general to cast light on the *political* topics which were his chief interest. It is here that he comes nearest to elaborating a theory to explain religion. I would argue that that theory leaves many questions unanswered.

How does religion persist in modern society? Marx regards

absence-of-species-being as a necessary and sufficient condition of the occurrence of illusion, but does not make clear the conditions for its specification into the religious form. Are these latter conditions something which persist unaltered into modern society, despite secularization and the divorce of state and civil society? If not, what is the class of which the conditions for religion in feudal society and the conditions for religion in modern society are both members? Would religion have arisen within modern society if it had never become established in pre-modern societies? Does its persistence in modern society suggest that political illusion is itself inadequate in the case of at least some people, that for such people a dose of religion must accompany their politics in order to make life bearable? Or, to put this same point more positively, does not the persistence of religion in modern society at least open the question whether there is some permanent and essential element in the human condition and in the human constitution to which religion answers?

I have already suggested a partial explanation, of the 'psycho-biographical' sort, for the inadequacies of Marx's treatment of religion. I would suggest that a further element of explanation is supplied by what I call the 'necessitarianism' of Marx's approach. His case would be well established if he showed that so long as men have illusory ideas about their condition they will not actively transform it, and that there is a connexion between the nature of life experience in a given society and the dominant ideology, or illusion, of that society. But his desire to present reality as a system or structure which can be fully explained in terms of a few basic relationships leads him to force the phenomenon of religion into a mould, his analysis of modern society, which his own arguments about its role in feudal society make inappropriate.

I would thus argue that there are inconsistencies and contradictions in Marx's treatment of religion, which inconsistencies can be explained in terms of Marx's failure to treat religion fully as a phenomenon in its own right. This in its turn can be explained in terms of Marx's own biography, and its consequences are intensified by his desire to present in his argument as great a degree of necessity and simplicity as possible. These inadequacies do not necessarily invalidate Marx's analysis of politics, which is his main topic here. They do however raise questions about his treatment of the whole human situation which cannot fail to have implications for many, if not indeed all, of the parts of his system.