I. What did Marx say about religion?

Marx’s oft-quoted “Religion is the opium of the people” is usually referred to as the essence of his atheism. Despite the prominence of this quotation, he, in fact, said surprisingly little about religion, most of this in the Introduction to his early work A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right (1843).

Please read the following quotations from this work to see the context in which the reference to the “opium of the people” occurs. How does this change your understanding of what this quotation is about and, more generally, of Marx’s atheism?

“…Man makes religion, religion does not make man. Religion is, indeed, the self-consciousness and self-esteem of man who has either not yet won through to himself, or has already lost himself again. But man is no abstract being squatting outside the world. Man is the world of man – state, society. This state and this society produce religion, which is an inverted consciousness of the world, because they are an inverted world. Religion is the general theory of this world, its encyclopaedic compendium, its logic in popular form, its spiritual point d’honneur, its enthusiasm, its moral sanction, its solemn complement, and its universal basis of consolation and justification. It is the fantastic realization of the human essence since the human essence has not acquired any true reality. The struggle against religion is, therefore, indirectly the struggle against that world whose spiritual aroma is religion.”

“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. The abolition of religion as the illusory happiness of the people is the demand for their real happiness. To call on them to give up their illusions about their condition is to call on them to give up a condition that requires illusions. The criticism of religion is, therefore, in embryo, the criticism of that vale of tears of which religion is the halo.”

“It is, therefore, the task of history, once the other-world of truth has vanished, to establish the truth of this world. It is the immediate task of philosophy; which is in the service of history, to unmask self-estrangement in its unholy forms once the holy form of human self-estrangement has been unmasked. Thus, the criticism of Heaven turns into the criticism of Earth, the criticism of religion into the criticism of law, and the criticism of theology into the criticism of politics.”

II. Paradoxes, Ambiguities, and Uses of Marx’s Atheism

- Marx sees religion as ‘real’ (“the heart of the heartless world”) and yet a form of “false consciousness”; its epiphenomenal. The oppressed only need gods because they do not know the real causes of their predicament. The oppressors also need gods to justify their otherwise unjustifiable dominance.
- He is sympathetic to the human need for religion and yet calls for its abolition
- For him, religion is a symptom of a disease, not the disease itself. The disease is the unfair economic foundation of society. His rejection of religion is therefore instrumental: it’s part of the philosopher’s vocation to establish the ‘true’ causes of injustice and criticize (intellectually ‘abolish’) false explanations. He, however, shows hostility to religion when it is appropriated by the ruling classes as an instrument of oppression, or as a ‘dominant ideology’.
- Marx is ambiguous as to whether religion will wither away as the new just society is established or it is a precondition for creating the new society.
- Does Marx’s rejection of ‘gods’ (atheism) constitute a specific worldview? Marx does not refer to atheism in this sense. But will such a worldview be needed in the new society?
Marxist atheism, therefore, lends itself to a variety of interpretations, depending on the social-historical context. It has created foundations for:
A) An analytical perspective for analysing the relationship between religion and society
B) Attempts to create a new shared worldview: ‘scientific atheism’ that, arguably, had all the hallmarks of religion.

III. The Historical Context of Marxist Atheism
Marx (1818 – 1883) lived at the time when the idea of changing society through human effort was becoming increasingly popular among Western intellectual elites (and beyond them)
The Philosophy of the Enlightenment, the Industrial Revolution, the Scientific Revolution, Social revolutions (1789; 1848).
‘Religion’ Marx was referring to was part of the ‘old order’ that was being challenged. His understanding of religion is historically specific.

IV. The Philosophical Context of Marxist Atheism
Marx’s atheism was part of his general philosophy of historical materialism that aimed to explain and change the world
‘Material basis’ and ideational ‘superstructure’
Marx’s critique of religion was part of his general theory of alienation (i.e. separation of people from their human nature caused by the oppressive conditions of capitalism).

V. Atheism becomes a religion: the Soviet Atheism
In the Soviet Union Marx’s atheism was transformed and became a state imposed monopolistic worldview
Rather than symptom of the ‘disease’ religion was declared a disease’
Scientific atheism was declared the ultimate indisputable truth and acquired semi-religious features
It became part of the state imposed ‘political religion’ with its own doctrines, rituals, and hierarchical organisation
The Soviet failure to ‘abolish’ religion also revealed the narrowness of the understanding of religion in the earlier versions of Marxism.

VI. Marxist Atheism as an academic perspective
Marxist atheism shows its analytical value when it does not have a state imposed status as the dominant ideology
It encourages us to understand human knowledge in specific historical contexts
It is useful for analysing social conflicts in which religion is involved
Marxist social scientists and historians have contributed to better understanding of the popular religious movements, such as millenarian movements.

Further Reading

- Full details about the AKC course, including the handouts, can be found on the AKC website at: [http://www.kcl.ac.uk/akc](http://www.kcl.ac.uk/akc)
- The AKC Examination will take place on Friday, 30th March 2012 between 14.30 and 16.30.
- Please note that in order to register for the AKC Examination, you have to be enrolled onto the AKC. If you are not enrolled onto the AKC, and you wish to take the examination, please contact Laura Collins at: [akc@kcl.ac.uk](mailto:akc@kcl.ac.uk) as soon as possible. If you are experiencing any problems with the AKC Exam Task on your Onespace student record, please contact Laura Collins, and don’t panic, we will deal with your query shortly.
- For more details regarding the AKC examination please go to link: [http://www.kcl.ac.uk/about/structure/dean/akc/current/exam.html](http://www.kcl.ac.uk/about/structure/dean/akc/current/exam.html)
- For past AKC Exam papers please go to link: [http://www.kcl.ac.uk/about/structure/dean/akc/current/archive/general/0910.html](http://www.kcl.ac.uk/about/structure/dean/akc/current/archive/general/0910.html)
- If you are unable to attend the examination on the set examination date of Friday 30th March 2012, please write to Laura Collins to request permission to be assessed by alternative means – but you should still register for the examination on your Onespace record.
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Some Philosophical Reflections 27/02/2012