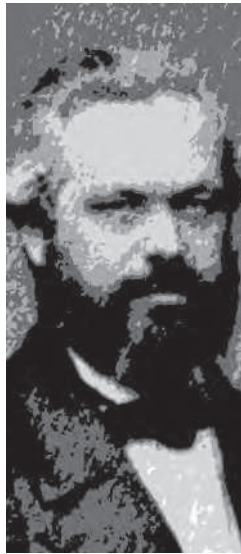


## Ideology and Religion

Peadar O'Grady



'The Catholic Church has long since been a primary, global carrier of the toxic virus of misogyny. Its leadership has never sought a cure for that virus though the cure is freely available: its name is equality. Down the two-thousand-year highway of Christian history came the ethereal divine beauty of the nativity, the cruel sacrifice of the crucifixion, the hallelujah of the resurrection and the rallying cry, that wakes me up and gets me through the day each day, of the great commandment to love one another. But, down that same highway came these man-made toxins of misogyny, of homophobia, to say nothing of shameful anti-Semitism, with their legacy of damaged and wasted lives and deeply embedded institutional dysfunction.'

Former President, *Mary McAleese*  
on International Women's Day 2018<sup>1</sup>

This statement on the legacy of religion, from a traditional catholic conservative -- a hopeful message of a church history of suffering and love on the one hand and a depressing message of the same church's history of oppression and hatred on the other -- is a useful starting point for a discussion of Marx's view of religion and ideology.<sup>2</sup> Ideologies and religions are systems of ideas and practices and, as we shall see below, a recurring and important question has been whether religion always serves to support the rich and powerful, the ruling class, as part of a dominant ideology, or, whether there can be a progressive role for religion. This also raises the question of how any set of ideas comes to dominate and whether the ruling class have to twist and distort these ideas to suit their interests or can elements of a dominant ideology be in some way true?

McAleese's statement came after the supposedly liberal Pope Francis cancelled the venue in Rome for a catholic women's conference because she and two other speakers were known to support gay rights. It was also weeks after a scandal erupted in Chile where the Pope refused to listen to local church members who complained when a priest who covered up child abuse was promoted to bishop. The metaphor of the 'virus of misogyny' was apt. First because of the upsurge in interest in women's oppression triggered by Trump's election, the victory of the marriage equality campaign and the rapid growth among young people of the popularity of the pro-choice campaign growing in leaps and bounds. Second because the word virus evokes both the notion of a transmissible disease but also its modern usage of a piece of code or language that causes destruction and which requires active methods to combat it.

The dramatic changes in religious practices and social attitudes of the Irish population in the past few decades arise in a context of relatively recent social changes, accelerating in the 1960s, from a predominantly rural agricultural population to a society of a predominantly urbanised working class. The relationship between social change and prevailing ideas and practices may often be a one-sided account of how ideas change social circumstances rather than vice versa. Revelations of child abuse certainly played a role in hastening the decline of the church but the loosening of the grip of the traditional pillars of Fianna Fáil and the Catholic hierarchy were evident by the 1960s and 1970s well before the church abuse scandals began to cause significant damage to church authority.

Marx was scathing about accounts of history that did not question the reasons for human actions:

"Whilst in ordinary life every shopkeeper is very well able to distinguish between what somebody professes to be and what he really is, our historians have not yet

won even this trivial insight. They take every epoch at its word and believe that everything it says and imagines about itself is true.’

While certainly not universal today among historians this tendency to explain changes in human action with changes in human ideas is still more common in public discourse than the reciprocal role of social change in altering both actions and ideas.

### **Marx and Ideology**

Born in 1818 in the city of Trier, near the French border of Rhineland Prussia (modern Germany) to a Jewish father, a lawyer who was forced to convert to Lutheran Protestantism to avoid anti-Semitic laws, Karl Marx came of age in a time of rapid social and economic change and revolution in Europe. The French revolution and the Industrial revolution centred in Britain inspired a ferment of political and philosophical ideas.

From his student days and throughout his life, Marx developed a ‘materialist’ view that ideas do not have a life of their own, that they are developed and passed on only in the material context of the productive activities of real people in a society where control of production is the key to social power. For Marx, it was neither the intervention of a supernatural external force of gods that was the force behind our ideas, nor was it the ideas of great leaders from an elevated position of insight or ability that was the primary force but instead our practical experience of the world, especially in the crucial area of our human relationship with the production of life’s needs and wants. Marx emphasised our experience of what he called the ‘mode of production’, the sum total of the organisation of production of material human life and the relations that go with it as it develops and changes over time.

Marx repeatedly outlines in his writing this view of where the ideas in our heads or ‘consciousness’ primarily comes from. In summary as he put it:

‘...Circumstances make men just as much as men make circumstances’.<sup>3</sup>

and as he outlined in more detail:

‘In the social production of their life, men enter into definite relations that are indispensable and independent of their will, relations of production which correspond to a definite stage of development of their material productive forces. The sum total of these

relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which rises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. The mode of production of material life conditions the social, political and intellectual life process in general. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness’.<sup>4</sup>

It is here that Marx first outlines the notion of a base and a superstructure: an overview of an economic foundation or ‘base’ that influences a political and ideological, cultural ‘superstructure’ which then can influence the nature of the economic base. While the complexity of these interactions should not be underestimated Marx’s key point of the primary ‘conditioning’ effect of the economic base is important.

Of course the ideas of the large majority of the poor have never had an equal influence to those of the rich owners of land or factories and this affects what the ‘prevailing’ or ‘dominant’ ideas are at any particular time and place in history:

‘The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas, i.e. the class which is the ruling material force of society, is at the same time its ruling intellectual force. The class which has the means of material production at its disposal has control at the same time over the means of mental production, so that thereby, generally speaking, the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are subject to it.’

Obviously producing ideas in a form that can be passed on takes time, skill and material resources. To pass on ideas orally requires a regular audience; writing things down and distributing them requires literacy, paper, ink, a printing press, transport and so on. Whoever has the resources to do this will obviously tend to produce and favour ideas which they think are in their own interests.

Scott Mann describes well this process in history:

‘The key concept here is that of the economic (material) surplus; the material wealth generated over and above that required to maintain (and ongoingly reproduce) the productive forces (the workers, their tools, the fertility of the land etc). For substantial surplus is required in order to sustain such specialised institutions of ideas-production and

distribution as civil service bureaucracies, temples, churches, religious schools, universities, newspapers, TV stations etc. The rulers are able to use their monopoly power over the means of production to force the producers to hand over such surplus to them as rent, taxes or whatever. And such surplus can then be used to finance the production and distribution of ideas which reflect and support the interests of the rulers'.<sup>5</sup>

This means that of all the systems of ideas or ideologies at any one time and place, there will tend to be a 'dominant ideology' and, in this Marxist sense, as Terry Eagleton defines it: 'An ideological notion is one which is somehow convenient for our rulers – one which conceals or naturalises or otherwise legitimates an unjust form of power'.<sup>6</sup> In this way the denial of the existence of a dominant ideology (or the insistence that only counter-ideologies like Marxism are actual ideologies) is a part of ideology itself.

It is notable, for example, how the word ideology or even the name of the dominant economic system, 'capitalism', go through extended periods of rarely being mentioned by anyone bar socialists, until an economic crisis, such as in 2007, comes along. Equally 'imperialism' or 'nationalism' as key elements of the ideologies of modern capitalist states are often not named but just taken for granted as a 'natural' and universally beneficial state of affairs, as Voltaire satirically put it in *Candide*: 'the best of all possible worlds'.

Later, in *Capital*, in his description of 'commodity fetishism', Marx describes the way in which a dominant ideology is promoted not just by the work of a superstructure of cultural production, powerful though that may be, but is also reinforced by the reality of the social and economic structure or 'base' itself. A fetish is an object treated as if it is supernatural when in fact it is something you or your society has produced, and Marx applies this religious notion to our relationship to commodities, noting however the real material impact on our lives of the system of commodity production and exchange, whatever we may believe about it.

At a simple level, no matter how much a socialist may hate the money system, they have to acknowledge and usually comply with the exchange of money to get goods and services because that is the actual system in force. At a more complex level, capitalism provides the

appearance of fair exchange because the exploitative nature of capitalism is hidden. 'A fair day's pay for a fair day's work' can seem superficially true when exploitation is denied and what is 'fair' for a day's work can be hard to quantify. Finally, the effect on workers of market competition or even collapse appears like a natural catastrophe, one that has real and material effects, whether or not workers understand or support the role of capitalist production and finance in that collapse. The point of Marx's emphasis on the economic base here is not that it defines our perceptions in some one-sided deterministic way, as some claim, but that ideology is not an 'either or' between the economic base and the political superstructure but an interaction of both that demands a deeper analysis and explanation and that can only be broken by revolutionary action and the revolutionary change in social structure and ideas that come with that action. Equally misleading are the attempts to associate the revolutionary socialist Antonio Gramsci with a one-sided emphasis on winning the ideological battle separate from other political or economic struggles or the inevitability of violent confrontation.<sup>7</sup>

### Marx and Religion

For Marx and Engels religion was a system of ideas about supernatural forces controlling humans that, like all systems of ideas, had its origins at a particular time in history. The earliest human belief systems, in societies with a hunter-gatherer mode of production, were driven by a need to understand the natural world and involved magical explanations and practices that were often sensible in terms of the level of existing knowledge. Religion arose with the development of agriculture and incorporated magic into a more organised system of stories and ideas to explain the world, increasingly controlled, and documented, along with the surplus, by a class of priests. With increasing trade came the social base for the development of philosophy and with industrial capitalism the social basis for experimental science. Religion continued to provide a way of incorporating human cultural practices, including music, art, literature, science and law as well as addressing the ordinary fears and frustrations of life due to the increasing lack of control over social forces of poverty and oppression and not just natural forces like floods or droughts.<sup>8</sup> However, Marx is always clear that religion

is a fiction and one we are not doomed to blindly follow:

‘The foundation of irreligious criticism is: Man makes religion, religion does not make man.’

He goes on to explain the persistent social power and use of religion in terms of its social function for the mass of ordinary people:

‘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. 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.’<sup>9</sup>

In Marx’s view religion was both an expression of suffering but also a protest against it. While it could be consoling and calming like opium, it could also be a source of protest (though this full version of what he said is rarely quoted). Marx was keen to emphasise that while ideas were important in politics, winning hearts and minds to a cause was not necessarily advanced by simply demonstrating that an idea or ideology was misleading or untrue, as he goes on to say:

‘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 important to address the ‘conditions’ (i.e. class society) that cause the distress that leads to accepting the illusions of religion. Otherwise it will be replaced by another illusion or by despair and the revolutionary forces will find themselves siding with those who oppose religion but are supporters of other forms of ruling class ideology supporting oppression and exploitation. It is not progressive just to criticise people that their source of comfort is an illusion. In some way all sources of comfort in an alienated, exploitative and oppressive class system are illusory part-solutions: hobbies, vocational jobs, socialising, self-decoration, shopping, psychotherapy, drug-taking (the actual opiate of the masses) and even sport, art, science or learning. Two

popular forms of solace in modern urban society: yoga and mindfulness are often not even recognised as having a religious foundation in Buddhism.

The notable failure of secular philosophy or science to adequately address working class concerns of alienation, exploitation and oppression is of course due to their shared ideological role, along with religion, in defending their current ruling class. Ideas of nationalism and religion for example share the notion that membership of a cultural group, by faith or tradition, or both, binds the rich to the poor and the real enemy are those outsiders who do not believe or belong to deflect the poor and oppressed from following their own interests to overthrow their actual oppressors.

When viewed from below, however, religion, as a channel for protest and rebellion, had been at the heart of the peasant war in Germany in the 16th century. A revolutionary movement against the feudal aristocracy with the protestant, anabaptist Thomas Müntzer leading the peasants, opposed by the champion of the rising bourgeoisie, another protestant, Martin Luther, who despite his brave opposition to the corrupt catholic hierarchy took the side of the nobles against the peasant rebels.

Religion was also at the centre of the English revolution a century later this time as a uniting ideology, with the Calvinist Puritans at its centre, that was cast off for secular science soon after but with a resurgence of religion in the 19th century with the rise of socialist movements like the Chartists. The revolutionary role of religions fighting on the side of the oppressed tends very quickly to decay into a dominant ideology as seen with early Judaism, Christianity and Islam.<sup>10</sup> Christianity as an exemplar moved from being the religion of the oppressed masses with features of mutual aid, sharing of possessions and resistance to tyranny to becoming the religion of that very tyranny, the Roman Empire. It later transformed itself into the civil service and ideological backbone of the feudal aristocracy, and later still into the defenders and obfuscators of the oppression and exploitation of the Capitalist elites in modern times.

Sudden upsurges of progressive liberation movements can still take a religious form, from the protestant Martin Luther King and the Islamic Malcolm X of the US civil rights movement to the Liberation theology catholic priests of Latin America in the 1960s and 70s.

## Conclusion

As we have seen, Marx's view of religion and ideology is one that takes a complex historical view of how ideas arise from social circumstances and are further changed by the actions and ideas of the mass of human agents. This means that ideas from the past can be useful but are limited by the needs of the new situation and by the interests of those who advocate them in the present. As Marx put it:

'Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living'.

This requires a concrete interpretation of all ideology, whether the dominant ideology of support for capitalism, like the church hierarchy of mainstream religions and other official cultural institutions like media or universities, or whether it is other counter-ideologies attempting to undermine and overthrow the capitalist system, at least in part, such as in social movements against oppression, exploitation and alienation.

In the example I opened with, Mary McAleese the Fianna Fáil candidate for president in the past, now posing as spokesperson for the oppressed, we should obviously be more than cautious. While having sympathy for the personal experience that McAleese has had in experiencing church oppression and the recent revelation of her brother's abuse by a Catholic priest, and that, while supporting many of her demands, for example that the church open up its official positions (including the pope) to women, we also have to caution of her desire to rescue the church hierarchy rather than destroy it, and to emphasise the intrinsically ideological role of church hierarchies in supporting oppression and exploitation. The political standpoint of McAleese herself has been one of defending a socially conservative capitalism in the past; today McAleese is a sign of change rather than a viable leader of that change.

The era of Trump has served for many as a confirmation that the long-term demise of any progressive role for capitalism or the church is well advanced and that the importance of religion for revolutionaries is to form united fronts with all genuine liberation movements and movements against oppression and exploitation. This

means showing solidarity to the oppressed including, and sometimes, as with Islamophobia or anti-Semitism, especially oppression on religious grounds, while at the same time arguing for the development of a truly liberated social structure, free of alienated labour, where control of production is truly in the hands of the masses and where the ideas and practices of art, science, morality, interpersonal relations and emotion are truly freely entered into and/or discarded:

'In place of the old bourgeois society, with its classes and class antagonisms, we shall have an association, in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all'.<sup>11</sup>

## Notes

1 [https://www.youtube.com/watch?time\\_continue=1818&v=2oFn3gW-Prd8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=1818&v=2oFn3gW-Prd8)

2 For a very accessible introduction to Marx's philosophy and approach to ideology (Chapter 10) see: Molyneux, John. *The Point is to Change It!*. BOOKMARKS.

3 Karl Marx, *The German Ideology*, available at: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/german-ideology/ch01b.htm>

4 Karl Marx, (1859) *Preface to A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, available at <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1859/critique-pol-economy/preface.htm>

5 Mann, Scott (1999) *Heart of a Heartless World; Religion as Ideology*, p35, Black Rose Books, London.

6 Eagleton, Terry. *Ideology*, Longman Critical Readers, p7, Taylor and Francis. Kindle Edition.

7 For a review of Gramsci's approach to ideology see Chris Harman (1977), 'Gramsci versus Eurocommunism', *International Socialism*, 98, May 1977, <http://isj.org.uk/gramsci-versus-eurocommunism/>

8 For an excellent introduction to the Marxist view of religion see Paul N. Siegel (1986) *The Meek and the Militant; Religion and Power Across the World*, Zed Books, London.

9 Karl Marx, (1843) Introduction to: *A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, available at: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1843/critique-hpr/intro.htm>

10 For an excellent account of the interaction of liberation and oppression in Islam see Chris Harman, The Prophet and the Proletariat, *International Socialism* 64 (autumn 1994), <http://www.marxists.org/archive/harman/1994/xx/islam.htm> and John Molyneux, More than Opium: Marxism and Religion, *International Socialism* 119 (summer 2008), <http://www.isj.org.uk/index.php?id=456&issue=119>

11 Marx, Karl and Friedrich Engels (1848) *The Communist Manifesto*, available at: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1848/communist-manifesto/ch02.htm>