

# CHRISTIANITY AS IDEOLOGY

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Religious people in our culture say things like this: 'All mighty God we have sinned against you', 'The Lord will love us', 'We will be happy with God in heaven', 'To God our lives lie open', 'God is our All Mighty and Eternal Father whose realm extends beyond the bounds of space and time', 'God will protect us, enlighten us and liberate us from fear and crippling anxiety', and 'God's Kingdom is coming to bring on a new world and a new man'.

We hear such things repeatedly and wonder whether we have any good reason to believe that they are true, or even probably true, or whether they are even reasonably believed by properly informed people. Moreover, at least some of us wonder whether such utterances are sufficiently intelligible to make their acceptance a coherent object of faith. Can we know or reasonably believe that such claims — and indeed the central claims of Judaism and Christianity as well — succeed in making statements which are either true or false?

A Christian believer says, 'All mighty God we have sinned, against you', or 'God's kingdom is coming to bring in a new world and a new man', or 'God is our all mighty and eternal Father whose realm extends beyond the bounds of space and time'. How are we to understand what is being said here, or indeed do we understand what is being said? The words are familiar enough, but do they make sense? In arguments about truth in religion, it is commonly assumed that we have at least a *minimally coherent* set of concepts embedded in our God-talk, but that we just do not know if the claims of religion are true. But it is this very assumption which is now coming under fire. Certain central concepts, including the concept of God, are so problematical that it is questionable whether we can know, or reasonably believe, or even justifiably take on trust that these concepts can be put to work to make religious claims which are either true or false.

The believer talks of God and claims to pray and confess to God.

*Who* or *what* is he praying and confessing to? (If you do these things, ask it as a question for yourselves.) Once we leave an anthropomorphic and idolatrous conception of God, where God — as a kind of cosmic mickey mouse — is a being among beings, it is unclear to what or to whom we are referring when we use that term. What does 'God' denote or stand for? 'God', unlike 'Hans' or 'Erika' or 'Mexico', cannot be ostensibly defined or taught. It doesn't even make sense to speak of seeing or encountering God. We can't literally be aware of God or stand in the presence of God. The term 'God' can only be introduced intra-linguistically through definite descriptions. It is understandable that we might try to help a person puzzled about what we are talking about in speaking of God. We might try to elucidate how 'God' is used in such religious utterances as we have quoted, by introducing the term intra-linguistically via definite descriptions. We can say, to use some typical examples.

- (1) 'God is the only infinite individual'.
- (2) 'God is the maker of the universe'.
- (3) 'God is the only ultimate reality upon whom all other realities depend.'
- (4) 'God is the only person transcendent to the world'.
- (5) 'God is the foundation of the world.'
- (6) 'God is the sole self-existent reality upon whom all other realities depend.'

We should note, however, that the alleged definite descriptions we introduced to make it possible to answer our question *who* or *what* is God, are at least as puzzling as 'God'. We should ask if we actually understand what they mean? What is it for something to 'transcend the world', or to be 'an ultimate reality', or 'a foundation of the world', or an 'infinite individual', or even 'the maker of the universe'? These phrases have a cluster of varied and complicated resonances and they are felt to be key elements in Christian cosmologies, but do they have a sufficiently unproblematic meaning for it to be the case that we understand what we are asserting or denying when we use them? Do we have any idea of what we are talking about when we use them, or even any understanding of what we are referring to when we use them?

I think it is questionable that we do. To probe and to begin to test that claim, consider someone who says (and means what he

Suppose A asserts it (tries to assert it) and B denies it (tries to deny it). That is, A ~~proves~~ ~~proves~~ it and B refuses to make that avowal. What could either appeal to in order to establish or even to give a somewhat greater probability to his or her view? What *experientiable* states of affairs count for one view and *against* the other such that on balance we are justified in claiming greater probability for one view over the other?

It seems to be that nothing does, but if everything and anything that actually happens or even conceivably could happen, is equally compatible with either claim, it is unclear what either are asserting or that one sentence succeeds in asserting something different than what the other, verbally quite different, sentence, is used to assert. What is one claiming that the other is denying? If that question cannot be answered, as it appears at least that it cannot, then the alleged assertions really fail genuinely to assert anything, and further, since such claims purport to assert 'grand cosmological facts', the claims are thus unmasked as incoherent conceptions. They don't and can't do what they purport to do. Moreover, it isn't the familiar Quinean situation where we just have two theories equally compatible with the available evidence. What we have is one set of putative claims — the religious ones — claiming to assert something thoroughly different, through and through mysterious, and of a quite different order. Yet there are no differences of an experientially specifiable sort between the two accounts. Experientially the believer cannot show what *more* he is asserting, cannot elucidate, except in equally perplexing terms, what he means to be saying that the non-believer is not, so that the suspicion is very difficult to resist that there is, after all, no non-verbal difference between them.

Some Christians of a rather empiricist bent would accept much of the general thrust, if not the details, of the above arguments.<sup>1</sup> They would agree that the above 'definite descriptions' I rattled off in an attempt to give a determinate sense to our talk of God are in reality *Ersatz* descriptions which are as problematic as the concept whose sense, or at least whose reference, they are trying to secure. However, they would argue that there is another definite description readily available to Christians which is far less problematic and which is one of the most basic things we can say about God. Indeed it is a something which

gives the term an empirical anchorage and enables us to describe or characterize God uniquely such that we can answer the question 'Who is God?'.  
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The definite description in question is this: 'God is the being who raised Jesus from the dead'. Here we have talk which relates to the spatio-temporal framework we are in and with which we are familiar. It is a description which gives us a sense of whom we are talking when we talk of or to God. Unlike the alleged definite descriptions I trotted out, this one is linked with the spatio-temporal framework in which we live. Moreover the claim is falsifiable and verifiable (confirmable and disconfirmable). If in some future situation, after the dissolution of our present bodies, we find out that God did not raise Jesus from the dead, we will have disconfirmed our claim. That is to say, if we discover in that world that Jesus is alive and well and all things are sub-ordinate to him, then we will have confirming evidence that God raised Jesus from the dead. If, however, we do not discover this, we will have disconfirming evidence.

We thus have shown, this Christian defense contends, how key strands of God-talk are verifiable, and we have given some determinate sense to 'God' by showing of whom it is we are talking in speaking of God. But, we are not out of the dark woods yet. for 'Jesus is alive and all things are subordinate to him' is equally compatible with 'God raised Jesus from the dead' and 'It is not the case that God raised Jesus from the dead'. But then we have not succeeded by that device in distinguishing what counts for one assertion and against the other. But if we cannot do that, we cannot distinguish between what one is asserting and the other denying, so that we cannot — except verbally — be distinguishing these claims. Moreover, we have trouble with 'God raised Jesus from the dead', for while we understand but do not believe that 'Peter raised Jesus from the dead', it is not clear what it *means* to speak of *God*, i.e., 'a pure spirit', doing such things, and it is not clear what (*if* anything) more is asserted by 'God raised Jesus from the dead' than by 'Jesus rose from the dead'. How can 'a pure spirit', 'a being beyond space' and 'out of time' coherently be said to *do* any of these things? How can a being 'out of time' and 'beyond space' act 'in time' to raise up anything and do all that without a body? It looks as though language, and indeed sense, have gone on a holiday. If nothing more is asserted by the employment of 'God raised Jesus from

~~in~~ 'dead' than is asserted by 'Jesus rose from the dead', then we ~~not~~ have anything that atheists could not consistently assert. ~~something~~ *more* is intended, then what this additional (more) ~~must~~ be explained, but this has not been done and it is not ~~ident~~ that it can be done. But in lieu of an answer here this ~~finite~~ description is little, if any, improvement over the *Ersatz* ~~finite~~ descriptions I trotted out. We are still at a loss to say ~~to~~ God is and we cannot point either.

~~the~~ central thrust of these arguments is correct, or if they can ~~be~~ clarified and deepened so as to secure those points, then ~~Christianity~~ will be seen to be wedded to conceptions so problematic that Christian faith will be seen to be incoherent. But ~~then~~, given its guidance and salvation functions, it will be ~~exposed~~ as an ideology. This seems at least just to be the position ~~we~~ are in. We do not understand what 'God' is supposed to refer ~~to~~ and the constituent terms in the supposedly elucidating ~~definite~~ descriptions are equally puzzling and problematic ~~about~~ their reference. And the whole sentences in which such ~~terms~~ are employed are such that we have no idea at all of how to ~~use~~ them to make statements whose truth or falsity is ascertainable. We do not know how non-verbally to distinguish ~~between~~ them and their denials.

## II

Let us suppose (at least to continue the argument) that Christianity has been so exposed and let us now ask what interests Christianity answers to and what socially necessary illusions it ~~secures~~, and how, if at all, it blocks our understanding of the foundations of society and deflects unreasonably and undesirably our actions as human agents.

These are questions that I do not think I now can in any ~~thorough~~ way answer, but they strike me as questions which ~~will~~ perhaps be part of the answer. Christianity in particular, ~~and~~ religion in general, arises as a response to, and with the ~~background~~ of, human suffering, degradation and exploitation in class-divided societies. Faced with this, it develops ~~eschatological~~ hopes for a new time and a new man with a radical transformation of the social relations of human beings, such that, by and by, when we have shuffled off these mortal coils, we ~~will~~ in Heaven at last have a society based not on exploitation

and man's inhumanity to man but on love in which a genuine classlessness, and in that sense equality, will have been obtained, a society in which there will no longer be any master and slave and in which for everybody there will be a genuine human flourishing. This, de-mythologized, is the utopian ideal which Theodore Adorno says should guide our critique of ideology. But in its religious form the hope for a classless and truly human society, through an ideological conjuring trick, has been *overjected* into some peculiar never-never land called Heaven. What we have here is a disguised, ideologically distorted, *expression* of genuinely human emancipatory interests and *enduring* human hopes. But, given the repressive, authoritarian and *class* nature of our societies, this hope is placed off in 'a *spiritual* world' after 'bodily death'. Man, in such an ideology, is *seen as* a sinful, largely selfish and aggressive creature who *must be* tamed into giving unto Caesar what is Caesar's and unto God what is God's and who must obey duly constituted authority. We must, the ideology tell us, learn not to aspire, let alone *seek*, what is not 'ours', but we must accept our God-given *place in* society and do our share and accept unquestionably God's *will*. We must come to know our station and its duties and *accept our* lot. It is within that framework that we have our *various* entitlements and our just desserts. We are enjoined to *accept* a social order whose foundations are built on miracle, *mystery* and authority and indeed on an authority which can *rightly* claim neither rational authority nor a morally justified *author*ity. The foundations of society are actually obscured from us and our condition in this world — which need not be so fixed — *is* made to seem fixed, as a consequence of our fallen *nature*. Everything, or at least almost everything, is, as the *crude image* goes, 'Pie in sky by and by'.

While there have been, and continue to be, as a tiny minority in the Christian Church, such truly admirable charismatic *figures* as Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Martin Luther King, Daniel Berrigan and Beyers Naude, generally and massively, the *Christian* Church stands, and has for a long time stood, on the *side of* reaction and repression. (We should remember Luther and the German Peasants and not forget the horrible fate of his *perhaps* equally great contemporary Thomas Muntzer, who did *stand* with the German Peasants.) Suffering, degraded and *exploited* human beings have been repeatedly taught to accept their *fate* as part of God's Providential Order and have projected to a

'Spiritual World' and a 'New Time' what could be distinctively human hopes, aspirations and earthly expectations. Religion ~~and~~ deflected them from going after what they might have ~~collectively~~ struggled to achieve in this world, by instilling in ~~them~~ an attitude of resignation concerning this world and ~~replacing~~ their worldly hopes with eschatological ones concerning ~~another~~ far better but purely 'spiritual world' which was to ~~be~~ their reward for the patient acceptance of the evils in this world. One was to accept one's worldly masters here and look to ~~the~~ new spiritual world' where such exploitation and degradation would finally cease. It is there and only there that they shall ~~overcome~~.

We should clearly recognize, in this heavenly swindle, the ideological function of such age old religious apologetics. It was ~~a~~ brilliant inspiration, for it both leaves scope for utopian hopes and effectively pacifies the masses, deflecting them from the struggle to achieve their actual liberation. As Feuerbach saw, the ideals and moral qualities that should properly be made the objects of purely human ideals are projected onto God. As our concept of God is enriched our concept of man is impoverished. Here we have, for a people caught in such class-divided and repressive societies, a socially necessary but still an ideologically distorted false consciousness. Religion cons them into accepting a repressive and dehumanizing *status quo*. It sings to man's liberation while helping to forge his chains.

In asking *what is to be done*, we should answer that we must break the spell of this false consciousness and make the demystified, ideologically unravelled, and utterly secularized positive side of Christian utopian hopes an object of our realistic endeavours with the at least heuristic ideal of a classless unauthoritarian society before us, where a genuine human flourishing for all can obtain and where not only inscribed on our banners but conditioned in our hearts and in our very most primitive reactions, there will be the maxim of egalitarian justice for a materially enriched society: "*from each according to his ability and to each according to his need.*"<sup>10</sup>

## References

1. James Moulder pressed something like this against **me**, though I would not like to saddle him with my **particular** formulation.
2. Some of the conceptual underpinning for the last **section** occurs in my "On Speaking of God". *Theoria* vol. **XXVIII** (1962), Part Two. "Religious Perplexity and Faith", *Crane Review*, vol. VIII no. 1 (Fall, 1965), "God as a **Human Projection**", *The Lockhaven Review*, no. 1 (1967) and "**Religiosity and Powerlessness**". *The Humanist*, vol. **XXXVII**, no. 3 (May/June, 1977).