

9

Is Religion the Opium of the People? Marxianism and Religion

Kai Nielsen

Is there a viable materialist conception of religion? This is a less simple question than it appears to be. Plainly, there are materialist conceptions of religion, from Epicurus through Marx and Engels, which explain religion as a function of material needs, and of the material conditions of human life which give rise to these needs. The question is: Are such theories viable or adequate to explain the phenomenon of religious belief? A viable conception of religion is one which doesn't simply explain religion away, but rather explains its origins, its distinctive cultural and historical forms, its persistence in various institutional contexts, its changes and development, its continuing and present existence in the modes of belief and action of individuals. The question of whether there is a viable materialist conception of religion is therefore a question of whether any of the presumptively materialist theories meet these requirements. What would it take for a materialist theory of religion to do so adequately?

Marx W. Wartofsky

INTRODUCTION

I shall first describe in unnuanced terms the canonical core of Marxian social theory, that part of the theory which makes it a distinctive social theory and must remain, though perhaps in some rationally reconstructed form, for Marxianism to continue to be a distinctive social theory. I shall then turn to a characterization of the proper sense of 'ideology' to be utilized in giving a Marxian account of religion as ideology.¹ In doing this I will argue that there

is an important distinction to be made between claiming that beliefs (including religious beliefs) are ideological and claiming that they are false or incoherent. Marx, Engels and the other classical Marxists as well presupposed, like Freud, that the cognitive errors of religious beliefs (their falsity or incoherence) had been firmly established by previous thinkers (e.g., Hume and Bayle); they took it as their task not to repeat or update those old arguments, but to reveal religion's ideological functions; to show the role that religion plays in our life and to show that that role is an ideological one.

In sections III and IV, I shall characterize the core of Marx's and Engels' account of religion (principally Engels', for he wrote more extensively than did Marx about such matters); I shall, that is, characterize their materialist conception of religion. I shall show how they conceived of religion's origins, its distinctive historical cultural forms, its changes and how these changes match with, and are functional for, modes of socioeconomic production. I shall then ask whether we have good grounds for believing that that conception, taken as a sociological generalization about religion in class societies, is true, or is at least a plausible candidate for being true. After some initial disambiguation and a locating of the proper scope and claims of the theory, I shall argue that it is a very plausible account indeed. It does not show us what the sole function of religion is – there is no such thing – but it does give us a compelling account of certain key functions of religion. It yields, I argue, a viable materialist conception of religion.

I

What is central to Marxianism is *historical* materialism and the conception that societies are divided into antagonistic classes with ideologies which, standardly, without such an awareness on the part of the agents involved, function to answer to the interests of one or more of the classes in the societies in which the agents live. The master claim of historical materialism is that 'it is in the nature of the human situation, considered in its most general aspects, that there will be a tendency for productive power to grow'.² What Joshua Cohen has called *minimalist* historical materialism 'is simply an elaboration of that master claim, it would only be defeated by what defeats the master claim, and so it is the final fall-back position for the defender of historical materialism'.³ Such a minimalist account

is not committed to the claim that all phenomena, not even all phenomena of great cultural significance, can be explained by historical materialism, but only phenomena which (directly or indirectly) are economically significant.

Minimalist historical materialism is also a *restricted* form of historical materialism. By this is meant that 'it restricts itself to explaining those non-economic phenomena which possess economic relevance'.⁴ Classical historical materialism, the historical materialism defended by Marx, Engels, Lenin and Trotsky, claimed that all phenomena of great cultural significance, including, of course, all such religious phenomena, were economically relevant phenomena and were explained by historical materialism. This is *unrestricted* historical materialism and it is a stronger claim than the minimalist needs to make. But centrally, historical materialism in any form is an attempt to provide a theory of epochal social change. For *restricted, minimalist* historical materialism this is limited to explaining the rise and fall of whole systems of economic relations such as capitalism, feudalism and relatedly, directly or indirectly, economically important phenomena. For *inclusive, unrestricted* historical materialism, by contrast, there is an attempt to explain the emergence of all major changes in society such as the emergence of Catholicism, Protestantism, pietism, and the like and to explain them as being *required* to unfetter the productive forces at a given epoch. But to claim that Christianity is required for the unfettering of the productive forces at a certain stage of their development, let alone to claim that Protestantism is required for capitalism to arise and be sustained, is to make a very strong claim concerning the predominance of material factors in explaining social evolution. Protestantism, particularly Calvinistic Protestantism, *facilitated* the development of capitalism (was functional for it), but to claim that it was *necessary* for its development is problematic. It is not clear whether Marx was committed to making such a strong claim or that (what is more important) whether contemporary Marxians should make such a strong claim. I am inclined to think not. Be that as it may, the weaker claim about Protestantism's facilitating the unfettering of capitalist productive forces, and thus being functional for capitalism, will suffice for my purposes. That, more generally, the various religions tend to facilitate the development of different productive forces, and that religion is in this way functional for them, is what I am claiming for a Marxian conception of religion.

Class as a conception is equally important as historical materialism

for Marxianism. Class, for Marxians, is not a matter of a person's consciousness of her position in society, but (whether the person is conscious of it or not) is a matter of her relationship to the means of production in the society in which she lives. In our society, the principal classes are capitalists and workers. Capitalists own and control the means of production, buy labour-power as a commodity and put that power to work under their direction (whether direct or indirect) typically in their enterprises. Workers sell their labour-power and, as they enter the production process, they are dominated by the capitalists or their managers. Workers, without ownership or control of the means of production, or at least any significant means of production, sell their labour-power in a commodity market for a wage and work, under these contracted conditions, for the owners of the means of production, directly or indirectly, under their direction.

In Western society capitalists constitute the dominant class and workers, constituting a class themselves, are members of a dominated class. It is, however, in the interests of the capitalist class that workers are not aware that they are dominated or even that they constitute a class with interests of their own that are distinct, or partly distinct, from capitalist class interests. Socialist political struggle centrally consists in the struggle for workers to attain consciousness of themselves as a dominated class, to see what their interests are, to recognize that they are importantly antagonistic to that of capitalists, to become aware of their power to break capitalist class domination and for them to proceed to struggle to break that domination and control and so gain a state where they collectively own and control the means of production.

In this class struggle ideology plays an important role. It is capitalist class ideology in our societies which works to keep workers from being aware of their position in the world and of their own interests. (This is not to say that the *production* of ideology is always or even typically deliberate.) In speaking of an ideology Marxians are speaking of a general outlook or belief system about human beings and society, about some sort of world outlook, with an associated set of practices, about how people cannot, so the ideology claims, but live in certain ways, about how, in those small areas where there is any choice in the matter, people should live and about how society should, or even must, be ordered. These outlooks, beliefs and associated practices answer to the interests of a determinate class (or classes) in a particular society (or cluster of related societies) during a certain epoch.

This being so, 'class ideology' is pleonastic. Without classes, on a Marxian conception of ideology, there would be no ideology. Standardly, but not invariably, ideological beliefs are false beliefs and also standardly, but again not invariably, people in the grip of a ideological beliefs are not aware that their beliefs are false. Indeed, they typically think they either are or presuppose deep truths about the human condition. It is for this reason that Marxians speak of ideological illusions and false consciousness. But false consciousness should not be taken as a defining feature of an ideology, but as something that normally goes with having an ideology or thinking or acting ideologically. What is a defining feature of an ideology is that *an ideology answers, or takes itself to be answering, to class interests.*⁵

Religion – all religion – is taken by Marxians to be ideology. Religious beliefs are said by Marxians to be ideological illusions, expressive of the false consciousness of the religious believer in the grip of a religious ideology. That is to say, the religious beliefs of believers are at best false and not infrequently incoherent. But Christians, Hindus, and the like suffering from false consciousness, take them to be deep, mysterious, sometimes ineffable truths about ultimate reality. Moreover, they are taken to be beliefs essential to sustain and to make sense of their lives – lives which, without these religious beliefs, would, the people in the grip of the ideology believe, lack all significance. But this, Marxians contend, is an ideological illusion, which is standardly, but not invariably, used in various ways – some subtle, some not – to further or protect the interests of the dominant class. Thus, in capitalist societies, Christianity typically but not invariably functions to support capitalism, and it does so by giving people a false or incoherent conception of their nature and destiny.

II

I have stated here, crudely and unqualifiedly, and with no attention to nuance, a central part of the canonical core of Marxian social theory, a theory which I think is, in its sophisticated articulations, the most plausible, holistic, social theory available to us. Be that as it may, this is not the place to examine historical materialism or a Marxian conception of class or ideology critically, though I shall remark in passing that I think a much stronger case for Marxianism can be made, and indeed has been made, by analytical Marxians

such as G.A. Cohen, Andrew Levine, John Roemer, Richard Miller, Erik Olin Wright, Rodney Peffer, Debra Satz, Joshua Cohen, Philippe van Parijs and David Schweickart, than has usually been acknowledged. But that for another day. I shall assume here what I have argued for elsewhere, namely that some rational reconstruction of Marx's social theory shows it to be a sound, or at least a plausible and attractive, social theory, and see what, given that assumption, should be said for a rather standard Marxian account of religion as ideology in the sense of 'ideology', that I have outlined.⁶ Indeed, its treatment of religion *might* be one of the places where Marxian theory stands in need of revision. And, whether this is so or not, there is the sociological fact that not a few theologians have thought of themselves, perhaps confusedly, as being both Marxians and Christians or Jews, and have taken the militant atheism of Marx and Engels to be inessential to their theories and revolutionary practice. Most Marxians believe that that conjunction rests on a mistake, even if in some circumstances it is a humanly and practically useful mistake. That is to say, Marxians could agree that it may be a very good thing indeed that there is a Red Archbishop in Brazil, that there are working-class priests who are Marxist militants and that there are liberation theologians and radical Christians.

Be that as it may, not a few have thought that Marxian explanations and critiques of religion are powerful as explanations of religion and as a critique of religion. Indeed, explanation and critique run in tandem here, for if a Marxian explanation of religion is on the mark, that very kind of explanation is also a critique. Marxian explanation explains religious beliefs as ideological illusions mystifying, for the people hoodwinked by them, their social relations and conception of the world in a way that supports the socio-economic structure – the relations of production – of their society. Moreover, it supports it in a manner that in reality does not, in most instances, answer to their interests or meet their needs. They (to situate it for a moment in our epoch) are taken in by capitalism in a way that conflicts with their own human flourishing and their leading as good a life as they could live. So explanation and critique run together here. They are *conceptually* distinct, but in this case you cannot do the first without doing the second. If the explanation is on the mark, religion has, in being explained, been *ipso facto* criticized.

However, what is often not noticed is that Marxian explanations and critiques of religion, like Freudian explanations and critiques, are dependent for their soundness on the soundness of secular,

non-ideological critiques of religion such as those of Holbach, Hume, Bayle or contemporary atheistic or agnostic critiques such as those of Bertrand Russell, Axel Hägerström, J.L. Mackie, Richard Robinson, Antony Flew, Michael Martin, Wallace Matson, or my own. Marxian accounts assert that religious beliefs, as expressive of false consciousness, are either false or incoherent. But they do very little by way of arguing for that, but, taking it to be obvious, seek rather to show that religious beliefs are ideological beliefs. But that ideological part by itself is not enough for their critique of religion, for ideological beliefs could be true. Most of them are not, but are rather false or incoherent beliefs, expressive of false consciousness, but there is at least conceptual space for ideological beliefs to be true or well warranted. What shows they are false or incoherent is not that they are ideological. But what makes them ideological is rather that they belong to a system of beliefs or an outlook concerning persons and society which answers to, or takes itself as answering to, class interests. Marx's *Capital* is as ideological as Smith's and Ricardo's political economy. They supported capitalism, helped sustain the class interests of capitalists and, while making some important and at least putatively true claims (claims on which Marx built), they made some importantly false claims too. But both their true and false claims were often genuinely scientific claims which, at the very same time, were also ideological claims – they supported capitalist class interests. And their theories as a whole, while being genuinely social scientific theories, were also ideological theories in support of capitalist class interests.

The same can be said of Marx's *Capital*. It is both an ideological theory and a scientific theory. It is deliberately designed to support working-class interests and was plainly also believed by Marx to be true ('objectively true' being pleonastic) and it indeed could be true, or, on some rationally reconstructed account such as G.A. Cohen's or John Roemer's, it is at least a plausible candidate for being a true, or at least an approximately true, theory with its linked practices. Louis Althusser notwithstanding, ideology and science, and ideology and truth, do not need to stand in conflict. They often – indeed, even typically – do, but they need not and perhaps sometimes do not.

What Marx and Engels, and Marxian accounts generally, show, if true, is that religion is ideology and that religious beliefs are ideological. But it is a further step to show that they are false or incoherent and are expressive of false consciousness. That they are false or incoherent is not shown, or, even in any remotely careful way,

argued for, by Marx or Engels or by the other major figures in the Marxian tradition. They rather presuppose it and take it as something evident to anyone with a reasonable education and not beguiled by ideology. That such beliefs are false or incoherent, they argue, has been well shown by Enlightenment thinkers such as Holbach, Hobbes, Hume and Bayle. Marxians, even such historicist Marxians as Antonio Gramsci, were children of the Enlightenment, building on and extending in new and striking ways the tradition of the Enlightenment,⁷ as did Freud as well (though very differently). Marx and Engels assumed that philosophers such as Holbach and Hobbes had it basically right about the *grounds* for religious belief. A contemporary Marxian, who is more philosophically sophisticated about the logical status of religious beliefs than were the classical Marxists, will shy away from Holbach and Hobbes on such issues and turn instead to Hume and Bayle or, in our time, to J.L. Mackie, Axel Hägerström or Antony Flew (Flew's rather fanatical conservatism notwithstanding). Marx and Engels, in an interesting little narrative in *The Holy Family* about the history of philosophy (including its discussion of religion) from Descartes to Hegel and Feuerbach, argue that Hume and Bayle have shown that religious beliefs are at best false.⁸ That critical task, that is, was carried out, they believe, by classical Enlightenment thinkers. Building on that, the distinctively Marxian contribution *vis-à-vis* religion is, by contrast, to show religion's ideological functions: to show how in this domain false consciousness functions ideologically to support particular modes of production.

So it is in this way – a way that is utterly different from, but still complementary to, a Humean, Hägerströmian or Mackian critique – that Marxian accounts of religion become important. If one is justified in setting aside a broadly Humean scepticism about religion, then the Marxian critique of religion would be less interesting, for, even if it shows that religious belief is ideological, that in itself would not show that religious believers have succumbed to false consciousness or (what is something else again) that religious beliefs are false or incoherent. Indeed, their being ideological might diminish their moral attractiveness somewhat, but it would not be impossible to believe that, with some alterations, the ideological dimensions might be excised or in some way neutralized on the one hand, or, even without alteration, justified because the class interests they support should be supported, on the other. However, if a broadly Humean and Baylean scepticism about religion is in place,

then the Marxian explanations and critiques of religion gain in interest. If, that is, religious belief – belief that God exists and belief in God – is in error, indeed in unexcisable error, then religious beliefs are at best false; further, if, as Marx and Engels believed, this has been more or less evident for a very long time, then the question naturally arises, why has religious belief been so tenacious? This is also a question that Freud, holding similar beliefs about the cognitive import of religion, addressed, that Feuerbach wrestled with and that Marx and Engels considered. Let us see what Marx and Engels had to say about it.

III

Following Ludwig Feuerbach, Marx and Engels regard 'the Christian God', in Engels' words, as 'a fantastic mirror image of man'.⁹ In fact, all religious entities in all the various religions are, they believe, such projections of human attributes and wishes. Where religion developed beyond animism, these human projections were turned into what in the imagination of human beings were thought to be supernatural entities. But such conceptions are incoherent; belief in them is, as Engels put it, nonsensical.¹⁰ That the dominated have these religious beliefs answers to the interests of the ruling class, but these projections of human feelings also answer, though in a deceptive and illusory way, to the interests of the dominated, despised people in class society, people with little hope that their needs could be met, their earthly aspirations satisfied, their lives made decent or, in some instances, even tolerable. If their lives contained even the possibility of becoming tolerable, Engels maintains, religion would not answer to their interests, but since their tangible, genuine needs and interests cannot be met, such an eschatological religion gives them an illusory hope and in that way goes some way towards answering a need in their lives. Moreover for them religion, and a certain kind of religion at that, was factually speaking inevitable. In perhaps his most famous passage on religion, Marx remarks:

Religious distress is at the same time the *expression* of real distress and the *protest* against real distress. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, just as it is the spirit of a spiritless situation. It is the opium of the people.¹¹

Both the remark 'it is the opium of the people' and 'it is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world' have been quoted again and again, but while they are compatible, they cut in rather different directions. A religious person could enthusiastically accept that 'religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world', but not – or at least much less easily – that it is the 'opium of the people'. A Christian, for example, could very well see the condition of human beings in such stark terms, as the remark about the sigh of the oppressed creature gestures at. This in part is what brings us to sickness unto death: to despair of the world as it is, and indeed as, even in the most favourable conditions, it could be, and of our lives in it.

However, as, say, with liberation theology (but not only with it) Christians could see the Christian message, as Moslems see Islam, as one demanding a struggle against those conditions, a call to resistance to conditions of oppression and heartlessness, even while not blinking at the fact, but fully taking it to heart, that this is the way the world is and indeed may always be. But when Marx goes on to say that religion is the opium of the people, he adds something, namely that this sigh of the oppressed, this protest against real distress, takes the form, with one attitude or another, of an acceptance of this dreadful world, an acceptance of one's lot, of one's station and its duties, no matter how harsh. And instead of placing one's faith, as did the Anabaptists, in the coming to be of the Kingdom of God on earth, and struggling to attain it, one places one's faith in another, better world, a 'Spiritual World', beyond the grave, where all the woes of this life will be a thousand times recompensed in a life of bliss in communion with God. What we have to look forward to is not a better earthly condition, but a life, after bodily death, in God's Spiritual Kingdom. This has been thought by people of a secular disposition to be a heavenly swindle and has been crudely called 'pie in the sky by and by'. Life for many people is hell now, in almost every sort of way, and there is no escaping this earthly hell, or even significantly ameliorating it, but, on such a religious conception, by a commitment to Christ, and by living in righteousness, we can be sure that we shall enter the heavenly kingdom of God after our death, and live forever in a state of bliss.

Engels and Marx – most especially Engels – trace how this and related conceptions are worked out in Christianity, though they are not denying that broadly similar things obtain for other religions, particularly for religions that have the status of what Engels calls

world religions.¹² But the emphasis is on Christianity, given Engels' emphasis on its ideological role in the Western world: how it facilitated, and continues to facilitate, the rise, stabilization and development of capitalism. But this account is also a narrative about the origin and development of religion. I think it is clear that Engels, a pure child of the Enlightenment, gives us a rationalistic narrative, which, as Wartofsky puts it, is also a materialist conception of the origin and development of religion in general and of Christianity in particular. But it may be none the worse for that.

IV

I will set out some of the core elements and then, in the light of this narrative, and critically reviewing it, say something about the import of Marxian claims about religion as the opium of the people and particularly about Christianity, as an ideological mask which helps sustain capitalist class society as it, albeit in different forms, helped sustain the slave society of Rome and subsequently feudal society, both with their distinctive modes of production.

I would like first to make a disclaimer. I am neither an historian nor a biblical scholar and am too much of a *fachidiot* to know whether Engels' historical narrative, particularly in the light of what has been discovered since his time, is a reasonably accurate account of that period and those developments, or whether instead, it is what anthropologists like to call 'a just so story'. *Perhaps* it is something in between, a reasonable account of the origin and development of Christianity, given what was known in Engels' time, but nevertheless somewhat one-sided and inaccurate in important details. I simply do not know. And perhaps anyway there is no reasonable prospect of telling it like it was.

What I shall assume, and I think not unreasonably, is that it is a plausible narrative, a reasonable just so story (if you will), and then, on safer philosophical ground, see where we can go with it. If, I shall ask, this was the way it was, or something approximating it, what does this tell us about the ideological functions of religion in such a world and about the viability of religion in general and Christianity in particular? Things could have been as Engels portrays them; perhaps they were, and still are. And if they were and are, what should we think about Christianity and about religion more generally?

Before turning to Engels' narrative, there is a further preliminary to which I should attend. The treatment of religion in Marx and Engels and most Marxian writings is not philosophy as we have come to understand it, at least in an Anglo-American and Scandinavian philosophical ambience. In the *philosophy* of religion we find claims such as 'If God exists, His existence is necessary', 'God is eternal', 'God is the perfect good', 'God is said to be an infinite individual but the very idea of an infinite individual is self-contradictory', "'God created the world out of nothing" is incoherent', 'What is good cannot be identified with what God commands', 'God's existence can be proved', 'God's existence cannot be proved', 'The very idea of taking it that the attempt to prove God's existence is a religiously serious or important matter reveals an incipient atheism'. These and like claims, are the stuff of the philosophy of religion and philosophers, who deal in any way with religion, if they are at all competent, know how to argue for or against them in ways that are clearly recognizable as philosophical.

Marx and Engels do not engage in such arguments. Indeed, I think that it is evident that they would regard concern with such arguments as fatuous. From the narrative they gave in *The Holy Family* about the development of philosophy, we can see that they think that what is to be said here has been well said by philosophers such as Holbach, Locke, Hume, Kant and Bayle, and that there is no need to repeat their work.¹³ In this way they believe that results in philosophy or in intellectual history can be established.

What Engels gives us, as we shall see, is a social and psychological description (a heavily interpretive description all the same) and an explanation embedded in a narrative resulting in a critique wedded to that description and explanation. But there is little in the way of argument or conceptual elucidation. Thus, as philosophers in the analytical tradition have come, perhaps in a too *parti-pris* manner, to view philosophy, there is little *philosophy* in their accounts of religion. Their claims are, for the most part, empirical – sociological, broadly economic, historical and psychological – and are establishable (or disestablishable) by empirical investigation and careful reflection on that investigation. Philosophical argument and elucidation, as we have come to understand them, have little place here. Apart from the fact that I cannot argue for or against them in the way I am accustomed to argue for philosophical claims, I do not care in the slightest whether they are philosophical or not.¹⁴ What I am interested in is their plausibility, whether we should accept

them and the import of their acceptance or rejection. What is important is whether it is reasonable for us to believe that their central claims, at least on some rational reconstruction, are true.

But to return to Engels' narrative of the origin, development and function of religion. Engels remarks that our conception of the gods first arose through the personification of natural forces.¹⁵ As he put it in *Anti-Dühring*: 'All religion . . . is nothing but the fantastic reflection in men's minds of those external forces which control their daily life, a reflection in which the terrestrial forces assume the form of supernatural forces.'¹⁶ In the most primitive societies, religion so reflected the forces of nature. But, as societies grow more complex, and particularly as a social division of labour becomes embedded in the social fabric of people's lives and classes come into existence, 'social forces begin to be active – forces which confront man as equally alienated and at first equally inexplicable, dominating him with the same apparent natural necessity' as the forces of nature themselves. 'The fantastic figures, which at first only reflected the mysterious forces of nature, at this point acquire social attributes, become representatives of the forces of history.'¹⁷

The religions of more complex societies – religions which have become more elaborately socialized – quickly took various forms among different peoples, who were differently socialized. In the general cultural area from which Christianity sprang, among the Egyptians, Persians, Jews and Chaldeans, for example, we had what Engels calls 'national religions' with their distinctive ceremonies, with their particular gods with their distinctive chosen people, with rites so distinctive and demanding that 'people of two different religions . . . could not eat or drink together, or hardly speak to each other'.¹⁸ Christianity emerged from this world of exclusively national religions – entering 'into a resolute antithesis to all previous religions', as, in that cultural area at least, 'the first possible world religion'.¹⁹ Christianity, Engels remarks, 'knew no distinctive ceremonies, not even the sacrifices and processions of the classic world. By thus rejecting all national religions and their common ceremonies and addressing itself to all peoples without distinction it becomes the *first possible world religion*'.²⁰

However, and that fact (if it is a fact) notwithstanding, just as with the previous national religions, Christianity arose under and reflected certain distinctive socioeconomic conditions. It emerged in the Near East during the ruthless hegemony of the Roman Empire and spread rapidly throughout the whole Roman Empire. At first

savagely persecuted by successive Roman emperors reaching its epitome with Nero, in some 300 years it came to be the state religion of the Roman Empire. In short, things so evolved that Christianity eventually brought 'the Roman Empire into subjection and dominated by far the larger part of civilised humanity for 1,800 years'.²¹ Why, Engels asks, did the 'popular masses in the Roman Empire' come to prefer 'this nonsense'? And why did 'the ambitious Constantine' finally see 'in the adoption of this religion of nonsense the best means of exalting himself to the position of autocrat of the Roman world'? Engels here seeks to explain the origin and development of Christianity 'from the historical conditions under which it arose and reached its dominating position'.

Engels argues that we can 'get an idea of what Christianity looked like in its early form by reading the so-called Book of Revelation of John'.²² This book, he claims, can be definitely dated to 68 or 69 AD; it is 'the oldest, and the only book of the New Testament, the authenticity of which cannot be disputed'.²³ And in it, we have Christianity in the simplest form in which it has been preserved. There is only one dominant dogmatic point: 'that the faithful have been saved by the sacrifice of Christ'.²⁴

What Engels is principally interested in here is the character of that Christianity, the socioeconomic conditions under which it arose, the people who became its adherents and their life conditions. 'Christianity', Engels asserts, 'was originally a movement of oppressed people: it first appeared as the religion of slaves and emancipated slaves, of poor people deprived of all rights, of peoples subjugated or dispersed by Rome.'²⁵ It emerged at a time when in the Greco-Roman world, and even more so in Asia Minor, Syria and Egypt, 'an absolutely uncritical mixture of the crassest superstitions of the most varying peoples was indiscriminately accepted and complemented by pious deception and downright charlatanism; a time in which miracles, ecstasies, visions, apparitions, divining, gold-making, cabbala and other secret magic play a primary role. It was in that atmosphere, and, moreover, among a class of people who were more inclined than any other to listen to these supernatural fantasies, that Christianity arose'.²⁶

The Book of Revelation – this authentic depiction of early Christianity, the earliest Christianity of which we have any knowledge – consists in a series of apocalyptic visions, which make up almost the whole of the book. Christ – the lamb – appears in the garb of a high priest. Christ is depicted as the son of God, but 'by no means

God or equal to God', though, as an emanation of God, he is said to have existed for all eternity. But, as important as he is, he remains subordinate to God. And, crucially, the Christ of the Revelation 'has been sacrificed for the sins of the world and with whose blood the faithful of all tongues and nations have been redeemed to God'.²⁷

What is revolutionary here is that we have a universal religion, a religion applying fully to all the oppressed, exploited and despised elements of society (themselves often very different people) of which there were very many in the Roman Empire. In a 'social Darwinian' struggle for the survival of the fittest among competing religions, the vital and deeply appealing message of Christianity, which enabled it to emerge supreme, was that in Christ, by 'one great voluntary sacrifice of a mediator the sins of all times and all men were atoned for once for all – in respect of the faithful'.²⁸

The first Christians were mainly slaves, but not exclusively so; in the towns many freemen lived lives nearly as impoverished as slaves', with no hope of escaping their destitution, while 'in the rural districts of the provinces' they were peasants 'who had fallen more and more into bondage through debt'.²⁹ These were people who had been utterly crushed by the iron fist of the Roman Empire. But, in addition to their different class status, they were also culturally diverse people, coming from many different societies. It was these peoples who became the first Christians. After the crushing defeat of the slave uprising under Spartacus, the slaves had no hope of earthly (worldly) emancipation. The same was true of the impoverished freemen and peasants. Moreover, their social units (tribes, or unions of kindred tribes) had been destroyed by the Roman military juggernaut and its accompanying system of government. Their social systems, their systems of ownership and ways of life, 'had been smitten down by the levelling iron fist of conquering Rome'. And 'Roman jurisdiction and tax-collecting machinery completely dissolved their traditional inner organisation'.³⁰ They were plundered and pillaged, treated in all sorts of appalling ways, and, like many people in the Third World today, they were growing steadily more and more destitute: 'Any resistance of isolated small tribes or towns to the gigantic Roman power was hopeless'.³¹

In such people the Christian message of salvation found fertile ground. It provided a heart in a heartless world by promising freedom from bondage and misery in a life beyond, after their earthly death, in God's Spiritual World, in heaven, if only they would live righteously now. (This, remember, was the message that Nietzsche

scorned.) Given their material and intellectual resources, it was a message of salvation that made sense to them and that they could take to heart. With no hope of earthly emancipation, misery and destitution was inescapable. So for any hope to exist, it must be a hope for a 'world beyond this world'. Thus, their way out – their only way out – was salvation 'not in this world', but in a 'new world', a 'Spiritual World', the world prophesized by Christianity, in which the faithful would live with God in His heavenly kingdom after their bodily death.

Against the religious conceptions and conceptions of *Weltanschauung* of the Judaic world, which put little stock in such beliefs, the Christian vision magically answered to the desperate aspirations of such people living in such appalling socioeconomic circumstances. Christianity triumphed in the cultural struggle, and belief in life after death, and the desirability of life after death, gradually became 'a recognised article of faith throughout the Roman World'. Christianity, taking 'recompense and punishment in the world beyond seriously', created 'heaven and hell, and a way out was found which would lead the labouring and burdened from the vale of woe to eternal paradise'.³²

Here we see clearly how, in a particular circumstance, religion can be the opium of the people and, to return to that famous passage from Marx's *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, 'the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, the spirit of a spiritless situation'. It is evident why people so situated should flock to such an eschatological religion.

Marx next remarks that 'the abolition of religion as the illusory happiness of the people is required for their real happiness'. Traditional criticism of religion limits itself to showing (trying to show) the falsity or incoherence of religious beliefs. But this kind of critique is not sufficient, though it is necessary, because it is through such a critique of religion that people become disillusioned and are made to think and to shape reality as people who have been disillusioned and have 'come to reason'. But we must not only learn, Marx argues, that religious beliefs are illusory, even necessary illusions for people caught in certain life conditions, we must also, from careful economic and social study, establish what Marx called the 'truth of this world'.³³ We need to learn about the conditions which need illusions and how we could have a world that did not need religious illusions or any other kind of illusion, and learn as well how to struggle (a struggle informed by theory) to gain that

world. But, of course, in certain circumstances (for example, for slaves during Nero's time), we would also see, if we were at all clear-headed, that any advance was a long way off. It was not something that was at all possible for them.

The early Christianity Engels describes fits well with the mode of production that obtained in the Roman Empire: a mode of production based on slave-labour. But modes of production change. And, with these changed modes of production, Christianity also changes. Indeed, as long as we have class societies, Christianity will change with these changes, in ways that match better and serve better the new modes of production. Thus, the feudal mode of production produced Catholicism with its hierarchies, the capitalist mode of production, Protestantism (most particularly and effectively, Calvinist Protestantism, or in England Anglicanism, resulting from a political compromise fuelled by an economic struggle, that yielded an Anglicanism which was a blend of Puritanism on the one hand, and Catholicism on the other, with the king as in effect a rather constrained pope). In France the violent bourgeois revolution, going hand in hand with the tenets of the Enlightenment, moved, in a way at first favourable to capitalism, to both materialism and social ferment and, with that, to a massive rejection of tradition. While initially liberating, affording the bourgeoisie a free hand unencumbered by feudal constraint, it was also unstable, given that it unleashed the rising proletariat. Principally as a matter of expediency, there was eventually a return to a rather chastised Catholicism, as the ruling classes, recognizing that they 'had come to grief with materialism', came to stress, instead of Enlightenment values, that 'religion must be kept alive for the people', for 'that was the only and the last means to save society from utter ruin'. For a ruling class with little in the way of faith and for some intellectuals with a stake in the status quo, religion came to seem a useful device to keep the working class in line. Sometimes they were not that clear-headed, but, clear-headed or not, they saw the social indispensability of religion, if *their* civilization were to be saved.

Central to Marxism is historical materialism which, as Engels puts it, designates 'that view of the course of history which seeks the ultimate cause and the great moving power of all important historic events in the economic development of society, in the changes in the modes of production and exchange, in the consequent division of society into distinct classes, and in the struggles of these classes against one another'.³⁵ In accordance with this grand

empirical hypothesis (for that is what it is), we have Engels' empirical claim that with the changes of economic development of society, with the changes in the mode of production and exchange, a society will get the form of religion that is most functional for that mode of production. But in doing so, since we are talking about class societies, that religion, to be so functional, will work to keep the dominated classes in line, to accept in one way or another their station and its duties, and to regard this, all things considered, as necessary and proper, or at least inescapable. In that way religion is the opium of the people, and usefully so, for the dominant classes and sometimes, when their situation is very hopeless, even, in a mystifying way, for the dominated classes too, for it gives them a consoling illusion of a heart in a world that is actually heartless.

V

Is this view true or a reasonable approximation of something that is true? If it is true, it is true as a *sociological generalization*, a generalization across all class societies. It is not a claim about what religious belief *must* be for every individual. It is a claim about how religion functions, or, more weakly, tends to function, in class societies. I am now asking whether we should believe that such a claim, so understood, is so.

If a claim is made as strong as the claim that this is the *sole* function, or even the sole social function, of religion, we have very good reason indeed for believing that it is false. Even with a basically Feuerbachian projectionist theory of religion, which in its essentials is Marx's and Engels' as well, we have the Freudian alternative which is also a projectionist theory, only the image we project in believing in God is that of a perfect but also an almighty father, a figure who is projected as a heavenly father but also as both a feared and revered father, and different psychological mechanisms are invoked. If we are making such a strong claim, we need to be given reasons for believing that the Freudian account is false and the Marxian one is true. Actually, I think sometimes – that is, in certain circumstances – one account is true and sometimes the other. And sometimes both are arguably true at the same time. The image we project in our imagination could be that of both a heavenly father and a distorted image of our social relations functioning to lead us to accept this vale of tears. As has often enough been argued,

the Freudian accounts and the Marxian accounts are both compatible and complementary, if not pressed dogmatically. Neither is very plausible as yielding the sole account of the psycho-social functions of religion. And Emile Durkheim's account, which tells us that what people worship is really society itself, though ideology leads them to misrecognize the object of their worship, is another rival materialist functional account of religion. But then no theory, neither Durkheim's, nor Freud's nor Marx's, yields the *sole* viable functional account of religion. Moreover, for projectionist accounts of the status of religious belief, Frankfurt School social theorists, such as Erich Fromm, Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, have pointed out that there are still other social psychological functions of religion not covered by the classical Marxian accounts and only inadequately covered by the Freudian and Durkheimian ones, which are humanly speaking very important indeed. We need religion not only to make intolerable social conditions psychologically tolerable, we also need, besides opium – or at least some people need in certain determinate circumstances – religion to make sense of their (our) tangled lives and (if we live long enough) to come to grips with the decline (often a radical decline) of our powers. Whether we are rich or poor (or somewhere in between), whether we are dominated or dominant, we need in some way to come to grips with the inevitability of our own death and with the death of others, particularly with the death of those we love. We know that we must die, but we need, or at least very much want, an account of our death's significance and with that an account of the significance, both singly and together, of our lives. (If our lives have no significance, our deaths have no significance either.) We have, as well, to gain something of such an account, to learn to come to face, and in some way understand and come to grips with, the failures in our lives and face all the heart-breaking face-to-face problems between intimates – between lovers, parents and children, between siblings, between friends and between acquaintances in the workplace.

These problems not infrequently leave us in a tangled mess, sometimes with a feeling that we do not know how to act or try to be, and with the feeling that these problems are intractable and inescapable, that somehow we must learn to live with them. It is not impossible, when confronted with such things, to feel that life makes no sense at all and that even posing these questions is senseless. Many of us experience a deep sense of alienation and feelings of despair. And the alienation in question, as Fromm has argued, is a

different kind of alienation from the alienation of which Marxists speak; but it is real for all of that.³⁶ In the face of this, religion functions to help at least some of us make sense of, or at least face and come to grips with, our tangled lives. This is not just, or perhaps even at all, for religion to be an opiate of an oppressed people or an opiate for anyone.

These existential functions of religion, as I shall call them, would persist in any kind of society, including a classless society. They might be less pressing in societies which are less harsh, less beset by injustice and domination of one class or gender or strata by another. But they would remain all the same. Marx, Engels, Lenin and Trotsky thought that, as societies moved towards classlessness, so religion would wither away. With the coming of a completely classless society, if such a society could ever come into being, we would have an egalitarian society of considerable affluence, enjoying high levels of universal education. In such a circumstance religion would in time completely wither away. They are, however, forgetting what I have called the existential functions of religion. They will remain in any society, even a classless society. These societies are supposed to be truly human societies where social relations, including our personal relations, will generally become clear. We will at last understand the truth about our world and about ourselves and finally have a just society, or *perhaps* even a society 'beyond justice', of equals. In such a world, some of these existential problems, it is reasonable to believe, would become more tractable, perhaps some would even disappear, but death, declining powers and human estrangement (something we see graphically depicted in the fictional world of Edna O'Brien) would remain. The latter might not be as frequent or perhaps as severe. But that estrangement, personal conflict, and the like would disappear in a classless society is, to put it conservatively, very unlikely. So some of the needs related to our existential problems, needs that fuel religion, would remain. The idea that religion would wither away with classlessness is, to put it conservatively, problematic.

Injustice, destitution, lack of control over one's life surely do exacerbate existential problems. But death, failing powers, damaged relations, deep human conflicts will remain in those classless societies. Death and failing powers are plainly not going away and there is no good reason to believe that the other existential problems would wither away in a classless society. They are part of the human condition. Some – particularly interpersonal problems – *might*

even be intensified with greater clarity about our lives, our being freer of domination and our having greater leisure and more options. The burden (if such it be) of choice of life-plans in such a circumstance would be greater.

I think, however, that it is unlikely that this, or anything very like it, would obtain. The greater life stress of a class society of limited abundance and opportunity is arguably still more damaging to such relations. But that is an open question and I do not intend to beg it here. The crucial point is that these existential problems of religion, though perhaps in a moderated form, would remain in any society, including any classless society.

Existential problems will remain, but it is not obvious that our responses to them must take a religious form. Unless the use of 'religion' is eccentrically extended, as Feuerbachians, Frommians, Braithwaiteians and Wittgensteinian fideists do, to cover many things that would not standardly be covered by 'religion', there could, in such classless or near-classless societies, as there can be now for some privileged few in the rich capitalist democracies, be, more or less society-wide, a non-religious, broadly secular ethical response to such existential problems.

Still, as a matter of fact, such existential problems, and the responses to them, have traditionally remained firmly in the domain of religion except for a privileged few. Moreover, this has, culturally speaking, been very persistent, and we need to be given very good reasons indeed for believing that this function will wither away or assume a non-religious form. Still, it may not be unreasonable to expect that, as the level of social wealth and security rises, as well as the general educational level of a society (if indeed anything like this ever happens), religion will very likely become *optional* for increasingly large numbers of people in that society, as it has already increasingly become optional for the privileged, educated few in rich capitalist democracies. But that is not to say that it will wither away or even that it should wither away. We need evidence for the first contention and arguments for the second.

VI

I think Marxians can and should accept this. They should say that these existential functions are functions of religion that might very well persist even with the demise of class societies. But they should

also respond by saying that recognizing this does nothing to undermine their claims about the ideological function of religion, claims about how it serves as an opiate to reconcile the oppressed to their condition. This is a pervasive fact of life in class societies. It is massively with us now. It is not just a function of religion in early Christianity in the Roman Empire, or for a medieval serf, or for German peasants during Luther's or Munzer's time, or for the English peasantry during the Wars of the Roses, or for a Russian serf or peasant of the nineteenth century, or for the slaves in the American South. It is pervasive in popular religion today. Protestant missionaries of a more or less fundamentalist persuasion carry out this opiating of society with a vengeance in the Third World. Whether they aim at it consciously or not, when they are successful – as they often are – in bringing religion to such destitute people, they also bring them an opiate. Religion there is the opium of the people. The religion they bring so functions for destitute peasants, primitive peoples whose cultures are in the process of being destroyed and the masses of lumpenproletariat crowding into the huge cities of the Third World – São Paulo, Mexico City, Lagos, Lima, Cairo and Manila. It also functions this way for many poor blacks and whites in the American South, as is graphically portrayed by Bertrand Tavernier and Robert Parrish in their documentary film *Mississippi Blues* (1984). Such proselytizing religions offer these impoverished down-and-outs the hope of a heavenly afterlife and it persuades them to be quiescent before the great capitalist powers that savagely exploit them and rule their lives. The religious Right is aggressive in its opposition to liberalism, which it sees, completely unrealistically, as disguised socialism or worse, while it teaches uncritical acceptance of the capitalist order.

Here what might become revolutionary or at least a radically reforming activity on the part of such destitute people is diverted into fantastic religious beliefs, in many ways not unlike the beliefs of the early Christians suffering under the Roman fist or the German peasants in Luther's time suffering under the oppression of the German princes with Luther's blessing. Like cheap schnapps introduced to the workers of northern Germany in Marx's time, such religion works to keep them passive, accepting without question the capitalist status quo. Popular religion (consider tele-evangelists in Canada and the United States) serves a similar function, though perhaps a little less blatantly. People are diverted from thinking critically about their society and from looking for real options for

change. Set to roll back the more progressive elements in their society (e.g. feminism and some forms of liberalism), caught up with issues that are both trifling and reactionary – issues that should not even be issues – such as homosexuality in the armed forces in the United States or women members of the clergy, capitalism, and indeed its correctness, is not only accepted, but celebrated in its supposedly ‘pure form’, though care is taken to agitate against, and to seek to aid in the excising of, any ‘socialistic’ (social democratic, welfare state) appendages that some liberals add, or try to add, to a ‘really genuine capitalism’. So here, as in the Roman Empire, or the Middle Ages, or in Luther’s time and again in Marx’s, popular religion – the vast mass of religious activity – has, however unwittingly, served the ruling or, if you will, the dominant, classes by supporting, sometimes adroitly, their socioeconomic order.

There have, of course, been exceptions throughout history, as part of the class struggles going on, even in popular religion: the Albigenians in southern France during the Middle Ages, the Levellers in England and the Anabaptists in Germany and Central Europe during Luther’s time. But these movements have been comparatively short-lived and have repeatedly been defeated. While Martin Luther was eventually glorified and became the founder of an important branch of Protestantism, his great contemporary Thomas Munzer, was rewarded for leading the peasant rebellion and preaching the Kingdom of God on earth, by being hounded across Central Europe until he was finally cornered, then hanged, drawn and quartered.

Still, it might be responded, that for our time at least, I have been one-sided and partisan: militant atheism once more raises its ugly head. There are, it can be continued, the phenomena of Martin Luther King in the United States, Beyers Naudé and Desmond Tutu in South Africa, the ‘Red Archbishop’ in Brazil, militant Marxist priests in Italy, Gregory Baum in Canada, Dorothea Sölle in Germany and the whole movement (to speak more generally) of liberation theology. In a more reformist manner, there have been movements in the United Church of Canada and some of the mainline Protestant Churches in the United States to aid refugees, to provide sanctuary for some of those political refugees declared illegal by the state, to struggle for the protection of the rights of gays and lesbians, and the like. And while the Catholic Church is massively, and sometimes dangerously, reactionary on many issues, the Catholic bishops of Canada took a stand for social justice for workers and against

nuclear proliferation. In short, while religions display massively and pervasively the ideological functions that Marxists have specified, religion is not always an ideological bulwark for the status quo. Sometimes religion acts as a force for social change. Sometimes, it is even a force for radical social change, involving a commitment to a radical transformation of society, as in liberation theology.

That religion sometimes plays this role should be acknowledged, and Engels' discussion of Thomas Munzer makes it perfectly evident that he, like Marx, recognized that. But they also recognized that this transformative stream is a minor strand of religious thought and practice, which has always been either defeated or gradually absorbed into large religious groups better fitting with the mode of production of the time. Thomas Munzer's movement failed. Gradually, after his assassination, Martin Luther King's movement lost its distinctiveness and thrust for progressive change. Beyers Naudé and Desmond Tutu were effective as aides to the ANC, but as aides to a powerful *secular* political movement. There are transformative elements in the Catholic Church, but they exist in the interstices of a very conservative, and presently, and indeed for a long time, a capitalist sustaining Church hierarchy, as was exemplified by Cardinal Spellman and, somewhat more subtly, is now exemplified by Pope John Paul II. Indeed, it is even possible to believe that, the good intentions of the Catholic progressives and radicals to the contrary notwithstanding, they in effect aid in sustaining the legitimacy and authority of 'The Church' (a generally very conservative Church) by showing that it has room for many mansions – it can be all things to all (or almost all) people. So by ideological lights 'The Church' stands vindicated, yet remains a Church which, as a whole, and particularly where it is secure, defends very reactionary policies (think of Catholicism in Ireland or in Quebec thirty years ago).

The situation is somewhat different with the mainline Protestant Churches. With a membership which increasingly largely comes from the more educated and affluent strata of society, these denominations often have reasonably progressive social policies, though hardly policies that seek to challenge the system. But without such policies, its more educated membership would drift into secularism, with the increasing disenchantment of the world. But, by advocating such policies, it has paid the price of losing much of its working-class and really impoverished (lumpen-proletariat) members to more popular religions which tend to be unapologetically

reactionary, in both socioeconomic and theological terms. So, conveniently for the established order, we have one kind of Church for one strata of society and another kind for another.

There is a lot more to be said here, including perhaps qualifications to what I have said above. Some of it would require more detailed and accurate knowledge than I have at my disposal. But it seems to me that my descriptions are close enough to the mark to make the Marxian sociological hypothesis a good one. Religion acts in fact overwhelmingly as the opium of the people. Intentionally or unintentionally – presumably most of the time unintentionally – religion supports the dominant mode of production, which in our society is capitalism, and with that the usually conservative cultural accoutrements that go with and are generally functional for it. Occasionally, of course, religion does not take that path, does not play that role, does not refute that hypothesis; but this is a sociological generalization about *tendencies* and not an attempt to state an irrefutable law sustaining contrary-to-fact conditionals, something that would, at best, have a very small place in most social science in any event.

VII

I want to return to something I merely gestured at earlier. Could one be an *historical* materialist, a communist, a believer in the class struggle and still accept much of the substance of the Marxist critique of religion as ideology, while remaining in a reasonably orthodox sense a Jewish, Christian or Islamic theist? My argument will be that this is at least a logical possibility and *perhaps* a reasonable possibility as well. Recall, as we have seen, that while Marx and Engels were materialists in more or less the same way that Holbach and Hobbes were materialists (what we would now call physicalists), they did not argue for their materialism or develop it, but simply accepted it as something that had been firmly established by these Enlightenment thinkers.³⁷ And with this, they accepted – I think rightly – as a corollary, atheism and the denial of immortality. Here they were good Feuerbachians. Moreover, with this they also, of course, rejected the Judaeo-Christian-Islamic worldview. But this rejection was not original and was not, in any very extended or careful way, argued for by them. But what they did argue for, and here they were original, was historical materialism,

a theory of ideology, the labour theory of value and a theory of classes, class conflict and class struggle.

However, in the present context at least the phrase 'historical materialism' is misleading, for, while it is compatible with materialism understood as physicalism (the thesis that matter – physical realities – alone exists or at least the claim that nothing else has a non-derivative and independent existence), it has at best only a tenuous relationship with materialism (physicalism). It neither affirms nor denies that matter alone exists, or that all reality, or at least all independent reality, is physical. It says, rather, as an account of epochal social change, that the ways the forces (the powers) of production develop are the fundamental determinants of major long-range social change, or at least of socioeconomically important change. It is the claim that, as we have already quoted Engels as saying, 'the great moving power of all important historic events is in the economic development of society', is 'in the change in the modes of production and exchange'. But this is not materialism (physicalism). Indeed, it has very little, if anything, to do with it. It just so happens that Marx and Engels were materialists in both senses. But a dualist (whether religious or not) or a theist (Christian or otherwise) could accept *historical* materialism. A Christian, Jew or Moslem could also be a socialist or communist, believing in both the desirability and immanent feasibility of such a socioeconomic ordering of society. A certain kind of Christian radicalism or egalitarianism might aid her in that. She might be a kind of contemporary Thomas Munzer. But her communism or socialism might be held independently, without being in conflict with her Christian beliefs. Similar things could be said for her belief in classes, class conflict and the importance of class struggle. Not all Christians have been pacifists or politically quiescent by any means, to say nothing of Moslems or Jews. The stumbling block for the theist might perhaps be in the Marxian belief that religion is ideology. She could not, of course, say with Engels that all 'religion is *nothing but* the fantastic reflection in men's minds of those external forces which control their daily life', and she could not accept the claim that God was *merely* a projection of our emotions. She could not accept such a reductionist, projectionist, error-theory conception of God. Such an account is a semantic account of what 'God' means, or 'belief in God' means, that is incompatible with Christian, Jewish or Islamic belief, or at least with theism, and, in articulating their accounts of religion as ideology, Marx and Engels do indeed articulate it in

such Feuerbachian terms and they make it perfectly plain – and perhaps in this they are right – that Feuerbach did not only have deep insight, but that they believe that the general structure of his projection theory is correct. (What they object to is his articulating a new humanist religion of man, instead of rejecting the society in which it is necessary to have religious beliefs.) They claim that religious belief-systems and practices generally tend to function to support and sustain the dominant socioeconomic structure of the society. Religious institutions (Catholicism, Calvinism, Judaism) generally function to reconcile people, and most particularly the dominated and oppressed people in the society, to the social order in which they live, no matter how miserable the social order is for them. In this way religion is, or pervasively tends to be, the opium of the people.

These are the core claims of the Marxian theory of religion as ideology and these claims could be true even if the projectionist semantic or ontological claims are false, or the projectionist claims could be true while this account of religion as ideology is false. Freudians and Feuerbachians have a projectionist theory, but not the Marxian account of religion as ideology. And a Christian believer could accept the Marxian theory of religion as ideology while rejecting, as she must, the projectionist theory of religion with its utterly naturalistic account of what it means to speak of God and to believe in God. Marxians, as we have seen, are also projectionists about religious belief. But their projectionism is distinct from their account of the ideological functions of religion. The latter, which is distinctive of a Marxian account of religion, could be accepted without the former. *In fine, a Christian theist (if that is not pleonastic), or indeed any kind of Christian at all, could accept what is distinctive of, and canonical for, Marxianism, without abandoning her Christianity.* She could accept, unqualifiedly, historical materialism, the labour theory of value, the theory of class, class conflict and class struggle, the Marxist conception of praxis and communism. She could not, of course, accept Marx's atheism and materialism (physicalism), but that is not distinctive of Marxianism. Holbach, Hobbes, W.V. Quine, Richard Rorty, Daniel Dennett, J.C.C. Smart, Peter Strawson, Stuart Hampshire and Donald Davidson all accept physicalism, in one form or another, and with that they must, to be consistent, accept atheism. But they could do this – and, indeed, all the above do – and still be utterly distant from Marxianism. They might even, as is the case for Quine, be very conservative and positively hostile to

it. And, while atheism and materialism (physicalism) was indeed important for Marx and Engels, and Lenin and Gramsci as well, it was arguably not canonical for their theories, for all the elements listed above as canonical, get along quite well without it, while materialism (physicalism) and atheism, as say in Holbach or Quine, do not require these canonical Marxian doctrines for their support or further rationalization.

A Christian could even consistently accept the opium conception of religious ideology and be either a Christian quietist or a liberation theologian. She could believe, to consider the first alternative, that, given the sinfulness and corruption of humankind, Christians should have nothing to do with politics or the secular ordering of society. That religion makes people pacific or quiescent before Caesar is just as it should be. In that way it is a good thing that religion is an opiate. Render unto Caesar what is Caesar's and unto God what is God's. The important thing is to attain purity of heart, to spread the Word and prepare for, and contentedly and confidently await, the coming of the Kingdom of God. This is a 'Spiritual World' which we will come to after our bodily death. Focus on purity of heart and 'these last things' and forget about politics. Given what we sinful human beings are like, it cannot but be a dirty business anyway. We should turn away from it and strive to develop what some Germans, under Hitler, called an attitude of inner emigration.

This quietist, pietistic response is not the only, or (to put it mildly) the best, Christian response to a Marxian theory of the ideological functions of religion, and it is certainly not compatible with a Marxian theory of class struggle. A better Christian response, accepting class struggle as well as a Marxian account of the ideological functions of religion, is that of liberation theology. Such a Christian could, and I believe should, say that Christianity almost invariably functions as such an opiating ideology. But, as we have seen, Marxianism does not say that religion always functions this way, let alone that it *must* do so. Such a radical Christian could say that Marxian theory does us a very considerable service in pointing out that this is the pervasive role that religion has played in history and that it continues very powerfully and effectively to play this role today. Our task, such a radical Christian could remark, as Christians, aware of this ideological function, is to align ourselves with atheists, or anyone else with a similar political awareness and human commitment, to struggle to bring an end to class society and the exploitation of one human being by another and to create a socialist

society of equals to bring about, if you want to use religious terminology, the Kingdom of God on earth, where exploitation and injustice would be at an end and where human beings would finally form a genuine community. It would be a community where they would at long last stand together as equals in caring relations. Jesus' identification with the poor and downtrodden, and his injunction for us to love one another, gives us a religious rationale for so acting and for so being.³⁸

Thus, I think, that there are Christians, and not Christians in any sham sense either, as in (for example) the Braithwaite–Hare conception of what it is to be a Christian, who could consistently be Marxians or Marxists, if to be a Marxian or Marxist is to hold most of the things that I have claimed to be distinctive of, and canonical for, Marxianism or Marxism.³⁹

VIII

Many Marxists or Marxians will be uneasy about my argument in the previous section. Are there any good reasons why they should be? Should we, if what I have called the canonical portions of Marxianism are approximately true, be militant Marxian atheists?

Most Marxians, in addition to seeing Marxianism as a emancipatory social theory, have also seen it as a *world-view*. Moreover, they have attached considerable importance to its being a coherent and rationally sustainable world-view. As Wilfrid Sellars and Richard Rorty take philosophers to be doing, and legitimately so, Marxians also want to see how things hold together in the broadest and most inclusive sense of that term. They want to establish, in doing this, that talk of a spiritual or supernatural world is nonsense, or at least a mistake, and, as Marx put it grandly, to establish 'the truth of this world'. Some of them were what we now call historicists (Gramsci most clearly), but none of them, not even Otto Neurath, were relativists, sceptics or what some now call postmodernists, who think that there is no truth of this world, or of any world, to be established. They might, if they could have studied Quine and Davidson, and could have read Putnam or Rorty, have come to be convinced that there is and can be no one uniquely true description of the world. But that would not lead them to relativism or scepticism or to a Mannheimist sociology of knowledge-orientation anymore than Quine, Davidson, Putnam and Rorty are so inclined or so entrapped

(so conceptually imprisoned). It is one thing to say that there is no uniquely true description of the world and it is another thing again to say that there are no true accounts of what goes on in the world that can be warranted. Science, including social science, and careful common-sense description – aware of ideological snares – will give us knowledge, much of which is cumulative, and an increasingly more adequate grip on the world (including the social world). While remaining, as were Marx and Engels, resolutely anti-metaphysical, Marxians thought, and contemporary ones continue to think, that we can gain an increasingly more adequate thoroughly naturalistic world outlook.⁴⁰ But this excluded religion as a source of truth and required us both to regard it as a cluster of human projections and to treat it as a mystifying ideology, though, some thought it, in certain circumstances (as with Munzer) a useful instrument (mythical as it is) to use in achieving emancipation. But, more typically, as we have seen, it functions as an instrument for conservatism: an instrument for sustaining the hegemony of the ruling classes, impeding the coming into existence of a genuinely democratic society, in which we would live in a world of equals.

However, could we not reject the Marxian naturalistic world-view while still accepting what I have called the canonical parts of Marxianism, that is, the emancipatory social science or critical theory perspective, that arguably really turns the machinery, if anything does, on the theoretical side of the struggle for socialism and a classless exploitation-free society?⁴¹ The answer is yes: a Christian, a Jew or a Moslem could consistently reject such a naturalistic world-view while wholeheartedly accepting the canonical parts of Marxianism. Would it not, however, be a *reasonable* thing – or perhaps even the most reasonable thing – to stick with the naturalism *and* the canonical parts of Marxianism? That, I believe, depends on your estimate of the intellectual strength of naturalism. If, on the one hand, you think, as Marx and Engels evidently did, that a materialistic or naturalistic anti-metaphysics on the Holbach–Hobbes–Hume–Bayle continuum has plainly and unassailably, or even with a considerable degree of plausibility, established a naturalistic view of the world, then you will conclude that building anything on the mere fact that canonical Marxianism and some forms of Christianity are not logically incompatible is not a reasonable thing to do.⁴² If, on the other hand, you think that naturalism is a mistaken, problematic or at least a rationally unmotivated world-view, indeed perhaps even itself an unwitting metaphysics, revealing more about our

Weltgeist than anything else, then you will not (or at least should not) think that that is so. You may be more sympathetic to a Christian-Marxian possibility.

IX

The reason that this is the way that things stand in Marxian discussions of such issues, and that there is little argument for naturalism in Marxianism, is that Marxians, like Santayana, who politically speaking was very conservative, take it as given that physicalism and atheism are true. I think this is so too, but I realize that a good number of knowledgeable people do not, so I have in my writing on religion, my Marxianism notwithstanding, *argued* for naturalism. If one does not, one just sidesteps argument and discussion with theists or Wittgensteinian fideists. That, for good or for ill, is the situation in 'the philosophy of religion game'. I wish the *philosophy* of religion game would wither away.⁴³ It seems to me to pose no intellectually challenging problems, but that notwithstanding, like Gramsci and Durkheim, I think religion is a very important cultural phenomenon indeed. Religion is not just superstition or a series of intellectual blunders or cognitive mistakes. I agree with Marx Wartofsky's remarks, quoted above, that an adequate materialist conception of religion could not so treat religion. But, like Wartofsky, I wish we would look at religion in good Durkheimian fashion as *no more than an important cultural phenomenon* and orient ourselves, and orient our understanding of the world and our struggles in the world, accordingly. But, alas, we cannot start there, if we wish to engage in the deliberations about religion current in our society. As long as there are thoughtful and informed Christians, Jews and Moslems in our midst, we cannot, if we wish to carry on a discussion of religion which includes them too, *simply assume naturalism*. So we must, in our attempt to gain some reasonable consensus about the truth about our world, engage in the whole discussion again (mopping up after Hume, as I call it) and write about religion as J.L. Mackie, Antony Flew, Wallace Matson, Michael Martin, Ronald Hepburn and I have, hoping that one day we will be able to progress the discussion on to the purely cultural territory on which Feuerbach, Marxians, Freudians and Durkheimians have placed it: to come to ask, *not* whether its doctrines are true, or reasonably to be believed to be true or rationally to be accepted

solely on faith, but instead to consider questions concerning religion solely as questions about what role religion plays, should play, can come not to play and should come not to play, in society and in the lives of human beings. Can human beings – not just a few relatively privileged individuals in a sea of religious people but whole cultures of human beings – live without religion? And, if they can, should they? These are some of the questions that we should be asking: these are questions that should be on our intellectual agenda. Looking at things this way, among other things, provides common ground for discussion between physicalists–materialists–naturalists, on the one hand, and, Jews, Christians and Moslems, on the other. Here we have something that, from our position now in cultural history, no thoughtful and informed person should think she has a good answer to.

Many Marxians – most notably Marx, Engels, Lenin and Trotsky – thought they had good answers to these questions. Human beings, they believed, could, and indeed will, attain a classless society, and, when they do, they will no longer need religion. They will also not need religion when they are self-consciously travelling on the road to a classless society, as many will be, near the end of the bourgeois era with late capitalism. When, that is, they are close to it, and self-consciously struggling for it, they also will not, in such a circumstance, need religion and indeed should not have it, for it generally stands in the way of their emancipation (including their resolutely acting) and of their flourishing. Religious beliefs, they believe, are at best false and generally have harmful effects. In this they are at one with Hume, though Hume understandably was more circumspect about this than were the classical Marxists. Thus, when the circumstances are right, religion can, and indeed should, gradually disappear from the cultural life of human beings, except as a cultural memory: an artefact, though a very important record of how human beings in the trying circumstances of class societies, came to grips with their lives. And religion, they believed, will so gradually disappear with the stable achievement of socialism and then communism. Even if some form of liberation theology is coherent, truth being a not inconsiderable value too, religion is not something to be believed in and it should only be regarded as desirable as a *tactical* measure in certain circumstances: circumstances in which it would be useful in the progressive movement of society.

The atheism of Marxists is not the wistful atheism of Santayana or the resigned atheism of Freud or the ironical atheism of Hume,

but is, like Holbach's, a militant atheism. (Indeed, with Lenin it takes an extreme form of militancy.) Marxians want a true view of the world and our place in it (if such can be had) to be available to as many people as possible and for it to become a part of their lives; and they want, as well, people, themselves included, to be able to live without illusions and opiates, and that means, they believe, *doing without religion*. This would come to a liberation of humankind from both the illusion of religion and the conditions that make that illusion necessary.

X

That Marxian vision of things is more problematic for us now, standing where we are in history, than it was for the classical Marxists, for at least two reasons. We can no longer reasonably share the optimism of Marx, Engels and Lenin that a classless society is plainly achievable. We seem as far from it as ever, perhaps even farther. The Soviet Thermidor was a bad thing, but when what replaced it was not a demystified democratic socialism, or at least social democracy, but the violent, lawless and corrupt mess we have now, for a time at least, a great hope went out of the world.⁴⁴ It can come to seem to us, looking at what was once the Soviet Union and was once Yugoslavia, a hopeless ideal, as unworldly as Christian ideals. To take socialism and then communism as being something to be taken to be reasonably on the agenda can come to seem like a bad joke, something out of line with the world we know or can reasonably expect to come into being. I hope that that scepticism is an overreaction to our recent history. But it may very well run deeper than that as common wisdom has it now. Perhaps socialism and a Marxian vision of the world are dead. That is a reason, a reason that Marx did not have, to rethink questions about the import of religion as a cultural phenomenon, the truth of atheism (if indeed it is true) to the contrary notwithstanding. Perhaps it is both an opiate and a saving *myth*. *Perhaps*, but only perhaps, if we are naturalists, we should have either the wistful atheism of a Santayana or the resigned atheism of a Freud and *not* the militant atheism of a Marx.

The second reason for greater pessimism than Marx and Engels and the other classical Marxists had is the neglect by classical Marxists of what I have called the existential problems of religion

(our tangled lives, the inevitability of death, failing powers, and the like). These problems are not going to go away in any kind of society, no matter how classless and enlightened it may be. Even if religion functions ideologically in the manner characterized by Marxists, it also, and even looked at just as a cultural phenomenon, functions as a set of beliefs and practices which provide, if not an answer, at least a response to and a stance to be taken towards, these existential problems. Is there a secular alternative that is as adequate or even more adequate than Jewish, Christian, Islamic or other religious responses? Some of us can, as Hume and Freud did, face our death, our pain, and the destruction and madness, cultural and otherwise, all around us, stoically and with a measured stance, not availing ourselves of the consolations of religion. Indeed some of us *could not*, given our beliefs about what is and can be the case, so avail ourselves of the consolations of religion even if we wanted to. But should we, and can we, reasonably expect this to be the response of more than a very few resolute and clear-headed intellectuals? Should we want it generally to be the response of human beings to religion – particularly human beings in conditions of reasonable security and abundance?

Both Hume and Freud thought such an atheistic option was a live one for only a very few. Perhaps they were too pessimistic and elitist. But perhaps not. And perhaps even Freud had his substitutes for religion. Some, of course, would say that the same obtains for Marx. Still, if we can, assuming we have had the good fortune to be soberly educated, should we learn, as did Hume, Freud, Marx, Lenin, Gramsci and a host of others, to face these existential problems without the benefit of religion? The standard answer is that we should because truth, though surely not the only good thing in the world, is one of the very important good things. But we should also not forget Nietzsche's and Foucault's reminders of the tricks we play on ourselves here.⁴⁵ But that notwithstanding, to overcome self-deception, other deception, cultural deception and to come to see things, as close as we can come to see them, rightly is something of not inconsiderable value. If the cumulative arguments and ways of viewing things of the Holbachian–Hobbesian–Humean–Feuerbachian–Marxian continuum are on the mark, or at least near to it, then, given the very great value that truth has for us, we should be led away from a religious response to these existential problems.

However, we should not forget that truth – though a very great good – is one good among others and it might, in this context, be

outweighed by other considerations. A Kierkegaardian might respond to the taking of such an atheist stance by saying that only self-deception, or at least a not reflecting long enough and hard enough or responding non-evasively enough to such existential problems, can lead us to think that we can overcome despair and utter hopelessness without a commitment to Christ. To do so, we must indeed crucify our intellects, believe in what is utterly absurd; but without it, if we are cursed with being reflective and non-evasive about ourselves, we will find our lives utterly meaningless.

However, such a claim, at least if taken straightforwardly, is false and, taken unstraightforwardly, question-begging. People in many cultural situations have made sense of their lives without such a religious leap and it is, moreover, hardly conducive to self-respect to believe, or try to believe, what we also believe to be absurd or, what comes to much the same thing, to crucify our intellects. If faith really requires that, perhaps we can make sense of our lives, face death and the madness around us, without that Kierkegaardian blind leap of faith.

Human beings rather more generally (or so we like to think), and not just philosophers and other intellectuals, wish to see life as a whole and to see how things hold together as a whole, so that they can come to have something of a coherent view of the world they live in. And with this, they wish to make sense of their lives. They often also have some hopes (perhaps unrealistic ones) of making this world a little more human: a better world with less injustice, more trust, caring and flourishing. Moreover, if these hopes are serious, they also want to know what must be done for that to be in some measure achieved – if indeed it can be achieved or even approximated.

An Enlightenment view of the world, say the view resulting from a coherent amalgamation and rational reconstruction of the core conceptions, arguments and narratives of Enlightenment thinkers – for example, the Holbach–Hobbes–Hume–Feuerbach–Marx continuum – provide something of that. Perhaps the greatest weakness in such naturalism has been in grappling with what I have called the existential problems of life. Its attitude here has often been too rationalistic, but here some progress is being made. Antonio Gramsci, Richard Robinson, Erich Fromm, Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, in different ways, have shown how those existential problems can be treated from a thoroughly naturalistic, but still a thoroughly non-scientistic and non-rationalistic perspective.

XI

Let me see, with that in mind, if I can pull together some of the strands of my discussion and produce something that bears some resemblance to a conclusion. Marx and Marxians see religion as a collection of at best false beliefs and, as well, of beliefs that are essentially ideological. Religious beliefs and practices function most typically as a support for the dominant class structure. That is their typical ideological function. They very often do that by consoling and mystifying the downtrodden with a belief in a glorious afterlife in God's kingdom. There can be no doubt that religion functions in this way, but, little noticed by Marxians, it also has what I have called existential functions. It helps us to make sense of our lives and to face our deaths, various human trials and even the tragedies and horrors that may be our lot: the various ills that Simone de Beauvoir has described so starkly and so powerfully. It helps us to face things such as the loss of our powers, or disability (such as a decline into senility or the pain of cancer) or our death, and of those we love. And it helps us come to grips with seeing all our hopes for a more humane world defeated.

Marxianism as a militant atheism, with a firm belief in the desirability of the withering away of religion when the situation warrants, must, to yield a fully plausible materialist conception of religion, supply secular substitutes for the religious ways of meeting those existential problems. It has traditionally had little to say here, but, I think, consistently with its naturalistic and historical materialist framework (with its related materialist conception of religion), it can make a good response. Let me broach this first by a little social description, followed by a couple of possible scenarios for the future and then a comment on them.

First, the social description. The advent of socialism, and after that of communism, and the achievement of a classless society would have to bring with it high levels of material abundance for all, with security, leisure and educational opportunities for all human beings to develop their capacities, to pursue their interests and to have the means to live decently together. It would also be the coming to be of a democratic society of equals, where people together would control and order their own lives. In such a world there would also be justice and conditions where people could live with dignity. But these things have not been achieved anywhere. Instead, considered globally, we live in a horrible world – a world which seems to be

getting steadily worse. Multitudes of people live in conditions which in some key respects are not so different from those of slaves, impoverished freemen and peasants in the Roman Empire or the peasants in Germany during Luther's and Munzer's time. People die of malnutrition at the rate of 50,000 a day and many who manage not to starve are so malnourished in childhood that for the rest of what in all likelihood will be their rather short lives, they are incapable of functioning normally. More generally, multitudes of people live desperate, marginalized lives in utter poverty and without any reasonable expectation or even hope that their lot will substantially change for the better. In such circumstances, just as Marxians expect, religions flourish in fantastic forms and plainly, and understandably, function as opiates, as an *ersatz* heart in a heartless world. The existential problems add an even greater overload to the problems that weigh them down. They are not only impoverished, but their personal relations with their intimates are corrupted as well. It is the world of *Shortcuts* together with general poverty. In the face of such conditions, the capitalist world might be progressing inexorably to what looks like a state of utter inhumanity for vast numbers of people. In such circumstances, neither Marxians nor anyone else, if they are at all reasonable, will expect religion to disappear. The conditions that make it necessary remain firmly in place.

Suppose, however, after a bit, one of two things happen. Suppose, first, that social democracy gains a new lease on life with neoliberal and libertarian market romanticism disappearing, so that we can finally get capitalism with a human face (something similar to what obtains in Scandinavia) and suppose further, on this first scenario, this gradually becomes global. Globally, that is, we gradually come to have security, reasonable material well-being, reasonably high levels of education and leisure and some reasonable measure of equality. There, if such a situation ever comes about, we can reasonably expect religion to wither away, as it in fact has in Scandinavia, a few Bergmanesque frettings aside. The existential functions of religion in such circumstances will be replaced by secular ones, the practice probably preceding the theory. We will have Weberian disenchantment with the world without despair or *angst* being pervasive in our societies.

Suppose, alternatively, no such humanizing of capitalism is possible; social democratic ways to affluence and equality do not work. We might in such a circumstance stay mired, for a not inconsiderable time, in the same nightmarish world. If that obtains, then there

will be plenty of ideological work for religion to do and it will flourish in the doing of it. It will remain an opiate and its existential functions will not be replaced by secular existential functions. But suppose, to go to our second scenario, in the face of the collapse of such social democratic hopes, a new militancy emerges among the proletariat and the lumpenproletariat (the great mass of poorly off or relatively poorly off or destitute people, if you do not like Marxian categories). Suppose, in addition, that among the poorly off, currently the majority of society, there exists an often reasonably well-educated workforce (including here professional workers). But their lives, let us further suppose, like the lives of the unemployed (functionally unemployable), become very vulnerable and their material conditions, including their workplace conditions and job security, steadily worsen. Suppose further that these are conditions that obtain, among other places, endemically in the advanced industrial societies (the great capitalist democracies). Eventually, in such a circumstance, let us further, and not implausibly, assume, becoming militant, many of these workers, together with the unemployed, so act as to topple capitalism and begin the construction of, and eventually set in place, a socialist socioeconomic order (perhaps now some form of market socialism). In doing this they also bring about a democratically ordered, roughly egalitarian society, of abundance and security. Again we can reasonably expect, as in the social democratic scenario, religion to wither away. The memory of religion's ideological support for capitalism will be in the awareness of the people making the revolution. Moreover, given the changed material conditions, and given the Marxian world-view that would go with such a socialism, religion's existential functions would, or so at least it is reasonable to expect, be gradually replaced by purely secular ones. Given its actuality and the interests it answers to, it is not unreasonable to expect of that world, with that world-view, that secular existential functions would replace the religious ones rather more readily than in the social democratic scenario.

Here are two ways to a world without belief in God or any other religious conceptions. If they are unfeasible, it is not because of the thought that religion in such societies (if they should ever come to be) would not be given up without life being adversely affected. If they are unfeasible, it is rather because we think that it is very unlikely that either of these socioeconomic orders will ever come into being, let alone be sustained, on anything like a world-wide

scale. It is easy to believe that this conception is as hopelessly utopian, or at least nearly so, as pie in the sky. Without speculating on the likelihoods here, what I think we can and should say is this: given the truth of naturalism, there are describable circumstances, and *perhaps* feasible circumstances (circumstances which would be good to have in any case), where it would be possible (if the circumstances obtaining are possible) to have a godless world where it would, as well, be a good place to live. (Suppose Iceland, with its fish stocks still in place, were the world.) It surely would be a much better world than anything we have now.

In the world we have now, it is, of course, *unthinkable* that religion would disappear, or even that it would disappear as an opiate keeping only its existential functions. Is it a good thing that people are religious in such situations (that is, in our real-life situations)? The answer is both yes and no. Yes, in that it gives something of a heart in a heartless world; no, in the sense that it diminishes, with its opiating and obfuscating effects, the ability of such exploited and degraded people to struggle against the conditions of their existence or to see clearly their condition and the possibilities for its alteration. The obfuscating and opiating effects of religion – social effects of religion which are both pervasive and persistent – stand in the way of their seeing the possibility of, the desirability of, and the necessity for, struggle to make it the case that the conditions where religion is a need no longer obtain. However, the crucial point here is that it is pointless to ask if it is good or bad for them to have religious beliefs when they cannot but have them in their actual circumstances. Munzer plausibly claimed that struggle against such conditions, for the very down and out, can only take form in the garb – the vocabulary and the conceptualizations – of religion; hence his stress on the Kingdom of God on earth. In circumstances of poverty, ignorance, hopelessness, relentless, exacting domination – conditions where life is intolerable – we cannot but have religion and religion, at least in the first instance, as an obfuscating opiate.

In life situations that are not so severe, but are still bad, as is the situation for most middle strata people in Canada and the United States now, we get things in between, such as the mushiness and mindless blandness of much popular religion in such countries, but mindless and mushy as it is, it still continues to play both an obfuscating and opiating function in such societies. (I do not speak of the Religious Right, which, though mindless and opiating, is not in all

instances bland and, in all ways, mushy.) Here Gramsci's stress on Marxism as a world-view taking on, though in an utterly naturalistic spirit, many of the cultural functions of religion is important. Perhaps such a world-view, if Marxian intellectuals could socialize the masses into accepting this 'secularized religion', might come effectively to replace religion. But again, we should not fail to take to heart the fact that nothing like this has happened. Moreover, given our historical experience, the idea of 'The Party' replacing 'The Church' does not resonate with us.

These Gramscian considerations aside, where security levels of work, wealth and education are considerable and democratic institutions are in place and stable, it is plausible to expect, where this persists for some time, that we will get, and valuably so, a move to a greater secularization of society and a diminution of religion. And where in such a circumstance religion persists for some, we can also reasonably expect it to lose more and more of its doctrinal substance and for it, for the individuals involved, to become an optional matter. Given the truth of naturalism, that, in such circumstances, is a good thing. There is no more need for opiates or for crucifying or even an obfuscating of the intellect. And the existential functions of religion, even without Gramsci's 'secularized religion', can be met in purely secular ways. Sometimes it is cloaked in a traditionally religious garb, but, where it is, it has come to have a *secular substance*. (Think here of the Braithwaite–Hare stuff or of Wittgensteinian fideism.) To be in such a situation, Marx took to be a very great good for human beings. And the things human beings would have in such a situation would also be good – indeed great goods – and over both of these matters Marx was right.

XII

Finally, I want, as a kind of coda to my conclusion, to return to the passage from Marx Wartofsky, which I cited at the beginning.⁴⁶ Wartofsky pertinently asks, 'Is there a viable materialist conception of religion?' I take it that Wartofsky means 'materialist' in both the historical materialist and the physicalist sense. And, as we have seen, while these conceptions are conceptions that fit well together – they have a kind of *Weltanschauung*ish affinity – still, not being logically or conceptually linked, they are not mutually entailing. It is, that is, very natural without being logically required for someone

who is an historical materialist also to be a physicalist. For an historical materialist, they occupy the same cultural space.

I have argued further that we can reasonably be both physicalists and historical materialists. Though independent, the case for both, particularly when historical materialism is given a minimalist reading and the physicalism is of a non-reductive sort, is very strong. It is not just that they conventionally go together, though they do that. Moreover, if we are consistent physicalists, we shall also be atheists. That many who are physicalists (i.e. materialists) do not so label themselves – say they are atheists – reveals much about the evasive fastidiousness, even the finickiness, of many intellectuals with their characteristic fear of being thought to be anything that might be taken to be obvious or vulgar.⁴⁷ If, moreover, we are non-reductive physicalists (roughly *à la* Davidson, Rorty or Strawson) and we are atheists of a broadly Humean sort (Humean as updated, *vis-à-vis* religion, by a consistent amalgam of J.L. Mackie, Antony Flew and Bernard Williams) and we are as well minimalist historical materialists, then, if we turn to an account of religion's ideological functions similar to that of Engels, we will have a viable materialist conception of religion, or at least have a good candidate for such a viable conception, if these accounts taken together are plausible candidates for being true.⁴⁸ But these things taken independently are good candidates for being true. Moreover, these things hang together in a plausible way, contributing to our reflective and rational desire to see, if we can, how things hold together: to get a coherent overall view of our situation.

Assuming – plausibly, I think – some non-reductive physicalism (the exact form for my purposes is unimportant) and assuming as well a broadly Humean atheism, I have set out, and argued for, a Marxian account of religion, an account that is essentially that of Engels. I have also argued that it is plausible to believe that the story it tells, particularly if supplemented, as I have argued it can be, by a materialist account of the existential functions of religion, is a good approximation to the truth. Moreover, it seems to me to be true also that we have no alternative materialist account which is more plausible, though it plainly is an account which builds on Feuerbach's impressive materialist account and that, in some ways, Feuerbach's account should be seen, though subject to Marx's and Engels' strictures, as filling in their accounts.⁴⁹ A Marxian account, or a Marxian–Feuerbachian account, explains religion, without explaining it away, as a function of our needs. It specifies some of

these needs and, meeting what in effect are Wartofsky's criteria of adequacy for a viable materialist conception of religion, it explains religion's 'origins, its distinctive and historical forms, its persistence in various institutional contexts, its changes and development, its continuing and present existence in the modes of belief and action of individuals'.⁵⁰ It could, of course, be both more nuanced and filled in much more fully than Engels does, or than even Engels and Feuerbach taken together do, and it is likely to be mistaken in some of its details. But this nuancing, filling in and minor correcting is something that can be done while using that very materialist conception of religion. Here we have, as is often the case in science as well, a bootstrapping operation.

Viewing philosophy, as Wilfrid Sellars and Richard Rorty do, as an attempt to see how things hang together in the broadest sense of that term and applying this conception of philosophy here, with a physicalism of a non-reductive, non-metaphysical variety (*à la* Rorty and, in effect, Davidson), with a broadly Humean atheism and with a Marxian conception of the ideological functions of religion, we have (taking them together, and particularly if supplemented by a Durkheimian conception of the function of religion (an equally naturalistic conception of the function of religion)), a very plausible account of how things in some areas central to our lives hang together and we have, as well, a very plausible candidate for a viable materialist (naturalist) conception of religion.

Suppose it is responded that no viable *materialist* conception of religion is possible, for to be a materialist one, it must explain religious beliefs as being at best false, and this is to explain religious phenomena away, rather than to explain the phenomena. But, as Wartofsky well insists himself, an account that explains religion away cannot be an adequate account of religion. However, it is question-begging to claim that a conception of religion which takes key religious beliefs, such as God exists and providentially cares for humankind, to be false or incoherent, must, by making that very claim, be explaining the *phenomena* of religion away. An account which explains how religion arises, how it is sustained, what deep human needs and interests it answers to, how it is crucial under certain material conditions to give meaning to the lives of human beings and to supply, or partially supply, the social cement of society (the bonding between human beings), certainly does not explain the phenomena of religion away, but explains it, and that is exactly what a Marxian account does.⁵¹

Notes

1. Andrew Levine, 'What is a Marxist Today?' in R.X. Ware and Kai Nielsen, eds., *Marxism Analyzed* (Calgary: Alberta: The University of Calgary Press, 1989), pp. 29–58. Kai Nielsen 'Analytical Marxism: A Form of Critical Theory', *Erkenntnis*, vol. 39 (1993), pp. 1–21; 'Elster's Marxism', *Philosophical Papers*, vol. XX, no. 2 (1992), pp. 83–106; *Marxism and the Moral Point of View* (Boulder, Co.: The Westview Press, 1989). Joe McCarney, *The Real World of Ideology* (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1980).
2. G.A. Cohen, *Karl Marx's Theory of History: A Defense* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1978), p. 158.
3. Joshua Cohen, 'Minimalist Historical Materialism', in Rodger Beehler et al., eds., *On the Track of Reason: Essays in Honor of Kai Nielsen* (Boulder, Co.: The Westview Press, 1992), p. 161. See also G.A. Cohen, *History, Labour, and Freedom* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), pp. 3–108.
4. Cohen, *Karl Marx's Theory of History*, p. 173.
5. Nielsen, *Marxism and the Moral Point of View*, pp. 98–116; and 'Some Marxist and Non-Marxist Conceptions of Ideology', *Rethinking Marxism*, vol. 2, no. 4 (Winter 1989), pp. 146–74.
6. Nielsen, 'Analytical Marxism: A Form of Critical Theory', pp. 1–21; 'Afterword: Remarks on the Roots of Progress', in *Analyzing Marxism*, pp. 497–539; 'Elster's Marxism'; 'On Taking Historical Materialism Seriously', *Dialogue*, vol. 22, no. 2 (June 1983); and 'Historical Materialism, Ideology and Ethics', *Studies in Soviet Thought*, vol. 29 (January 1985), pp. 47–64.
7. Gramsci might seem out of step here with the Marxist tradition, for he argued for a 'secular Marxist religion'. However, like Braithwaite and Fromm, he uses 'religion' in an extended sense to connote a world-view, a *Weltanschauung*, with affective practices and commitments, whether naturalistic or not. Antonio Gramsci, *Quaderni del Carcere*, ed., V. Gerratana (Turin: Einaudi, 1975), pp. 2185–6. See also Nielsen, 'Reconceptualizing Civil Society for Now: Some Somewhat Gramscian Turnings', *Arena Journal*, new series, no. 2 (1993/4), pp. 159–74; and 'Marx and the Enlightenment Project', *Critical Review*, vol. 2, no. 4 (Fall 1988), pp. 59–75.
8. See the selection from *The Holy Family*, in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *On Religion* (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1957). This is a useful collection of their writings on religion from Marx's doctoral dissertation (1841) to Engels' late writings on the history of early Christianity (1894–5). The selection from *The Holy Family* is from Chapter VI of *The Holy Family*.
9. Marx and Engels, *On Religion*, p. 290.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 194. Engels does not say what he means by calling them 'nonsensical'. He could simply have meant that they were plainly absurd. There is no reason to attribute to him the strict logical positivist sense of 'nonsensical' as 'being without sense'.
11. Karl Marx, *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right* (1844), p. 42.

12. Marx and Engels, *On Religion*, pp. 193–203.
13. *Ibid.*, pp. 59–68, 289–96.
14. The ‘demarcation problem’ arises here. From at least Kant to Husserl, to Wittgenstein and to ordinary language philosophy, there has been a concern to demarcate philosophy from other activities and to isolate for it something purely conceptual. Even with a Quinian rejection of that very enterprise, a rejection, that is, of any attempt at a demarcation that would isolate something pure and distinctive for philosophy to be ‘uncontaminated by the empirical’, the actual practice of analytic philosophy (Quine’s included) is as if such a demarcation has been made and sustained. Given that practice, what Marx and Engels are doing in discussing religion is, for the most part, not philosophy. In reacting to that, we can go in one of two ways. We can simply say ‘So what!’ and get on with our business, or we can argue that we should reject such essentialism over and in philosophy and claim instead that concern with demarcation is just that. Whichever way we go, I think it is important to keep hold of the fact that it is truth that we are seeking in discussing the issues Marx and Engels raise. Concerning demarcation, see both the introduction and the contribution by John Passmore in Jocelyne Couture and Kai Nielsen, eds., *Métaphilosophie: Reconstructing Philosophy?: New Essays on Metaphilosophy* (Calgary, Alberta: The University of Calgary Press, 1993), pp. 1–55, 107–25.
15. Marx and Engels, *On Religion*, p. 225.
16. Engels, *Anti-Dühring* (1878), p. 146.
17. Marx and Engels, *On Religion*, p. 147. I think it is quite mistaken to assume, as Engels does, that religion was at first simply a personification of the forces of nature and that only later did religion become involved with the personification of social forces. From what we know about primitive religions both the personification of natural and social forces are involved in the religion of primitive societies. But that Engels is mistaken here, if he is mistaken, has no effect on the general viability of his account of religion as ideology.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 202.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 201–2.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 202.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 194. Engels is plainly, as almost everyone was during that time, Eurocentric here. It is not the Western world, where Christianity reigned, which constitutes ‘by far the larger part of civilised humanity’. There were many other great centres of civilization as well.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 197.
23. *Ibid.*, p. 207.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 206.
25. Engels, ‘On the History of Early Christianity’ (1894–5), p. 313.
26. *Ibid.*, p. 323.
27. *Ibid.*, p. 325.
28. *Ibid.*, p. 325. ‘Social Darwinism’ is put in scare quotes because it is unclear whether ‘social Darwinism’ makes much sense. See Morton White, *Social Thought in America: The Revolt against Formalism* (Boston:

Beacon Press, 1957), pp. 6–162, 206–22; and Richard Hofstadter, *Social Darwinism in American Thought* (Boston: Beacon Press, revised edition, 1955). It is very doubtful that socio-biology has made any difference to these analyses and appraisals of the viability of Social Darwinism.

29. Ibid., p. 331.
30. Ibid.
31. Ibid., p. 332.
32. Ibid.
33. Marx, *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, p. 42.
34. Marx and Engels 'On Religion', p. 310.
35. Ibid., p. 296.
36. Erich Fromm, *Marx's Conception of Man* (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1961), pp. 24–57. See also his *Psychoanalysis and Religion* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1951) and his *The Dogma of Christ and Other Essays on Religion, Psychology and Culture* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1963).
37. They, however, no more than Hume, are mechanistic materialists. In that, their materialism differed from that of Holbach. But very few physicalists nowadays are also mechanists.
38. However, as Engels makes clear in his critique of Feuerbach, it is a mistake to put 'literary phrases in place of scientific knowledge, the liberation of mankind by means of "love" in place of the emancipation of the *proletariat* through the economic transformation of production'. Marx and Engels, *On Religion*, p. 224.
39. One of the things that I think should be dropped from the canonical core of Marxianism is the labour theory of value. Historically speaking, of course, it has been a central part of Marxism, but it also has been an albatross around its neck and many Marxists with impeccable credentials (e.g., G.A. Cohen, Andrew Levine and John Roemer) have dropped it.
40. Marx and Engels, *On Religion*, pp. 58–68, 289–96.
41. Gramsci would be one Marxist who would not accept that. While being a materialist in both the senses we have discussed, he also thought that Marxism needed to articulate a total world-view that could and would be diffused throughout whole societies. He agreed with Croce that *the great problem of the modern age* – perhaps here reflecting too much the particular situation of Italy of their time – *was to learn to live without religion, that is without traditional confessional religion*. Croce thought the central political task was to establish an utterly *secular* 'religion of liberty', what we would now call a secular humanism. Gramsci dismissed that as 'an atheism for aristocrats' and argued that we need a unified and culturally pervasive *proletarian atheism*. Societies, such as Italy, needed a coherent, unitary, society-wide diffused conception of life and of human nature. He called this a 'lay philosophy' (something some now call a 'public philosophy') and, as it gripped a whole culture, it would generate an ethic, a way of life, a civil and individual form of conduct. This 'lay philosophy' was, in his terms, to come to function as a 'secularized religion' and

- it would be a functional replacement of traditional religion. It was, as he put it, to be an 'absolute secularization and earthiness of thought, an absolute humanism of history'. He thought that 'Marxism was the only religious faith that is adequate to the contemporary world and can produce a real hegemony' (Gramsci, *Quaderni del Carcere*, pp. 1854–64). It is not only, on his conception, that Marxism is a scientific theory, a political strategy, an understanding of history, a philosophy, it is also a new secularized religion which would make in an integrated way this world-view and practical ethic into a distinctive and total culture pattern. So to speak of religion and faith is a similar extension of the use of 'religion' as we find it in Feuerbach, Fromm, Braithwaite and Wittgensteinian fideists. But it is very plain that for Gramsci this religion was a Marxian atheistic *Weltanschauung*. His concern is with the dynamics by which it would become an integrated part of modern culture and come to be hegemonic in society. Indeed, it would provide a deep and holistic transformation of society. When we attend to the content of what he is saying the phrase 'secularized religion' ceases to be misleading. The key question for us to ask now, standing where we stand, is to ask of his conception the question that Rawlsian social democratic liberals ask of communitarians. Given the *de facto* intractability of pluralism in the societies of the capitalist democracies, is such an integrated total *Weltanschauung* achievable and sustainable without a morally unacceptable use of force? Indeed, is it even stably achievable with the use of such force? Our historical experience in recent decades should incline us to think not. See the references in note 7 and see W. Adamson, 'Gramsci and the Politics of Civil Society', *Praxis International*, vol. 7 nos. 3–4 (1987–8), pp. 327–8. See also his *Hegemony and Revolution: Antonio Gramsci's Political and Cultural Theory* (Berkeley, The University of California Press, 1980).
42. Relying, it could be further replied to the Christian, on such purely logical possibilities and setting aside what makes a good claim to be a more plausible conception of things (here naturalism) because it is not *conclusively* established is just the quest for certainty all over again.
 43. Where I discussed such traditional philosophical matters most traditionally and extensively was in my *Reason and Practice* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), pp. 135–257.
 44. G.A. Cohen, 'The Future of Disillusion', in Jim Hopkins and Anthony Savile, eds., *Psychoanalysis, Mind and Art: Perspectives on Richard Wollheim* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1992), pp. 142–60.
 45. Barry Allen, *Truth in Philosophy* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993).
 46. Marx W. Wartofsky, 'Homo Homini Deus Est: Feuerbach's Religious Materialism', in Leroy S. Rouner, ed., *Meaning, Truth, and God* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1982), pp. 154–5.
 47. For example, see Barry Allen, 'Atheism, Relativism, Enlightenment and Truth', *Studies in Religion*, vol. 23, no. 2 (1994). For a forthright expression of atheism by a philosopher whose methodology is very

- similar to Allen's, see Richard Rorty, 'Religion as Conversation-Stopper', *Common Knowledge*, vol. 3, no. 1 (Spring 1944), pp. 1-6. See my reply to Allen in the same issue of *Studies in Religion*.
48. J.L. Mackie, *The Miracle of Theism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982); and Antony Flew, 'The Burden of Proof', in Leroy S. Rouner, ed., *Knowing Religiously* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1985), pp. 103-15; and Bernard Williams, 'Review of *The Miracle of Theism*', *Times Literary Supplement* (11 March 1983). See also my *Philosophy and Atheism* (Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books, 1985), pp. 211-31.
 49. See here Wartofsky, '*Homo Homini Deus Est*'; and his *Feuerbach* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1977).
 50. Wartofsky, '*Homo Homini Deus Est*', p. 154.
 51. I would like to thank Jocelyne Couture for her assistance in preparing this paper. She is not, of course, in anyway responsible for its contents.