

## **MARXIST VIEW OF RELIGION MUST KEEP UP WITH THE TIMES**

**Pan Yue**

Everyone holding political power is bound to come into contact with religion: there are so many things in the world that are inter-related with it. If we are to genuinely complete the transformation of our Party from that of a revolutionary party into a party in power. We must re-examine the function of religion in the new light of the fact that we are a party in power, resolving the pressing problem of relations between government and religion through sensible administrative measures, and conducting a rational and scientific study of relations between government and religion in the light of modern thinking. For this reason, in the face of the rapid developments that are taking place, the first requirement is that the Marxist view of religion must keep up with the times

### 1. “The Theory of Reflection” and “The Theory of Religion as Opium”

Religion, which belongs to the category of faith, answers basic questions of mankind that cannot be resolved on the basis of reason. Unlike science, which explores the factual world, religion explores the world of meaning. Religion is also unlike science in that, when science does explain the world of meaning, it does so rationally and logically, whereas religion’s explanation of the world of meaning is based on thinking that transcends reason. In a sentence, religion exists in areas where man’s thoughts do not penetrate and his actions are ineffective.

In his essay “Towards a Critique of the Philosophy of Hegel”, Marx argued that “religion is the sigh of the oppressed soul, it is the emotion of an emotionless world, and, in the same way that it is, as it were, the spirit of a spiritless system, so religion is the opium of the people”. Here, Marx uses the language of imagery to show that religion possesses the important social function of “providing spiritual consolation to people in their suffering”. In his original meaning, Marx was in no way intending to pass judgment on this function of religion, nor, in describing it figuratively, could he have been making a judgment about its intrinsic character. In explaining this sentence, however, Lenin creatively added the word “anaesthetises”, which altered the sentence to the familiar “religion is the opium which anaesthetises the people”, and also changed [Marx’s] original phrase about “the people’s need for religion” to “the ruling class used religion to anaesthetise the people”. By altering the subject, he completely changed the meaning. Still more unfortunately, Lenin summed up the sentence about

“religion [being] the opium of the people” by saying that “this was the cornerstone of the whole Marxist world view of the religious question” (see the article “On the Attitude of Workers’ Parties Towards Religion”). Another conclusion drawn from the extended meaning given to these words is as follows: “Marxism has always considered that all modern religions and churches, and all religious bodies of whatever kind, are organisations used by bourgeois reactionary groups to buttress their system of exploitation and to anaesthetise the working class. We must wage a struggle against religion. This is a rudimentary principle of Marxism.” (See “The Complete Works of Lenin”, volume 17). As a result of this, the sentence to the effect that “religion is the opium with which the bourgeoisie (the ruling class) anaesthetises the people” has become our standard understanding of Marxism’s world view of religion; it has also become the basis on which we have formulated our religious policy. Religion is seen as a “poison”, as a relic of the old society and a ghost which is utterly incompatible with an advanced class, an advanced political party or an advanced system, and as an ideology which is diametrically opposed to Marxism.

We should pay attention to the historical and cultural background to language. In Europe, especially during the period when Marx was alive, the understanding of opium was different from that of the Chinese people, who had experienced the “Opium War”. In his “Debate in the Sixth Rhine Provincial Assembly (First Article)”, Marx pointed out that “the theory of the world on the other bank is [that of] religion”. In his editorial in issue number 179 of the *Kolnischer Zeitung*, Marx also referred to religion as the “wisdom of the world to come”. As regards the nature of religion, Marx thought that [the idea] that it was the state and society, which gave rise to religion was an inverted world view since they were themselves [part of] an inverted world. [He said] that “religious suffering [was] a reflection of real suffering and was also a protest against real suffering”. In his article “Anti-Duhring”, Engels went further, pointing out that: “The whole of religion is nothing more than the fantastical reflection within men’s minds of the external forces which control their daily lives. Within these reflections, the world’s forces take on a superhuman shape.” In Marx’s eyes, religion was a product of the existence and development of humanity, a kind of simple, spontaneous world-view with a definite rationality. It was by no means entirely negative, nor was it necessarily reactionary or benighted, still less was it necessarily alien to a socialist society. Marx and Engels considered that “in every age, the social and economic structure forms the actual base, and in every historical age the legal and political institutions, as well as the religious and philosophical viewpoints, form the superstructure”, which is to say that religion does form part of the superstructure. It is

essential that we fully understand Marx's meaning, which is, in particular, that now that the proletariat has seized power we should not treat religion as an enemy but should rather regard it as a mirror in which to find a reflection of ourselves as we devote *ourselves to our own improvement, in addition, we must* fully understand the nature of the [different] stages of Lenin's attitude to religion. At the time of the October Revolution, the Russian Orthodox Church had colluded with reactionary forces in fierce resistance to the revolution, so that Lenin's picture of religion was clearly characterised by the strong feelings of the time. When the Revolution had proved successful, however, there was a new content to Lenin's viewpoint: he proposed that "in our party programme, we should not proclaim that we are atheists" and [added that] "it would not be prohibited for Christians or believers in God to join the Party". He even illustrated this by saying that: "if there is a priest who wants to come over to our side and undertake political work and sincerely complete the work of the Party, then we can accept him into the Social Democratic Party". At the present time, the source of religion is fear of the unpredictability of capital,..... There is no kind of children's primer that can persuade the masses not to believe in religion." From this it can be seen that Lenin's thinking about religious theory had undergone a gradual adjustment in the light of the actual situation of the revolutionary struggle. It was by no means always the case that his judgment [of religion] was a negative one based on the harsh reality of the struggle: on the contrary, it moved forward in parallel with the developing situation. It is possible to imagine that, if Lenin had lived longer and survived through the transition of the Party from a revolutionary party to a party in power, he could very well have developed a still newer, still more comprehensive viewpoint on religion. We, on the other hand, having failed to realise, after seizing power, that Lenin had put forward different statements [on religion] at different historical stages, went on using the "opium theory" as the criterion by which we judged religion, with the result that our national policy on religion has always been skewed, for which we are now paying the price.

The Marxist view on religion should now get back on the right track. We should replace Lenin's "opium anaesthesia theory" with the "theory of reflection" of Marx and Engels. Since it is reflective, it is both natural and rational. In its reflective form, religion carries with it the characteristic of fantasy (in that it involves deism or idealism), while in its reflective *content* it is both realistic and idealistic (in its social content and cultural idealism). And since religion includes people who are taking a stand against the reality of suffering as well as people who are seeking true goodness and beauty, it affords comfort to men's hearts, gives them the courage to get on with

their lives, and compensates them spiritually for the enormous deficiencies in the reality of their lives. As for these enormous deficiencies in the reality of people's lives, these cannot be avoided in any society, and so far no substitute has been found to replace the function of religion in providing such spiritual compensation. Religion is not the product of the class war, nor is it the monopoly of those who control society. [This applies] in the case of all kinds of societies or political systems - [religion] does not bear the name of feudalism or capitalism, still less does it bear the name of socialism. On the other hand, it *can* be feudalist or capitalist - it can even be socialist. Nor does it necessarily rise and fall when a particular kind of social system rises or falls, which is why it has been able to survive from ancient times to the present day. It is precisely the long-lasting nature of religion, combined with its independence and adaptability, which gives it the capability of adapting itself to a socialist society.

## 2. The Special Function of Religion in the Life of a Modern Society

At a work meeting of the head of the national United Front Department in 1993, General Secretary Jiang delivered an address on "giving a positive lead to the mutual adaptation of religion and socialism", which was exactly suited to the needs of the Chinese Communist Party in its transition from a revolutionary party into a ruling party. In his capacity as the manager of our society, he re-assessed the mutual links [which should exist] between religion and socialism, affirmed the common basis for the mutual adaptation of religion and the socialist society and reflected the theoretical character of the process by which Marxism should keep up with the times. These were guiding thoughts for our Party in its research on the question of religion. We naturally recognise that there are many points on which religion and the socialist society have not adapted to each other, which is why there is a need to provide leadership. Since it is a matter of providing leadership to opposites, however, if they were to become opposites who collaborated with each other to a limited extent, they would at least no longer be at loggerheads with each other. As a result, the Chinese Communist Party would no longer have to cope with [the problem of] religion but would instead exchange all its negative factors for positive ones. By going beyond the "Theory of Opium as an Anaesthetic", therefore, General Secretary Jiang's speech will have marked another breakthrough in the practical development of the Marxist viewpoint on religion during the new age.

During the early period of the Communist revolution, strong emphasis was placed on the purity of ideology, and opposition to theism was seen as an important element in

maintaining working class morale. The Communists expended much energy on exposing the use of religion by the landlord class and the bourgeoisie to anaesthetise the people, which [at that time] was a necessity of the class war. Now, the Chinese Communist Party has changed from being a revolutionary party into a party that rules society, and from seeing the fomenting of revolution as its main duty to seeing its main purpose as consolidating its social base. For this reason, Marxism's view on religion also needs to expand its reflective base, incorporating within this the positive results of religio-sociology and cultural studies. We shall discover that religion is a sociocultural system, that, while its core is spiritual faith, it also includes a mass cultural connotation, and that, in addition, it has political and other functions as well. [We shall also discover that,] while it does have a negative role with regard to social development, it has a positive role as well.

Lenin asserted categorically that religion could very quickly be consigned to the dustbin as a result of the very process of economic development. But in the rapid economic and technological development of today, religion is certainly not withering away. The reason for this is that religion has special functions concerning mankind's social life which cannot be replaced by science or material wealth. In the past, the understanding of religion on the part of the various forms of materialism, including Marxism, was arrived at, methodologically speaking, by analysing it by means of "structuralism", that is to say that its characteristics were defined from the epistemological viewpoint of what religion produced. On this basis, it was explained that religion was a kind of alienation of mankind's knowledge of himself and of the world.. But now we need to open up a new "functionist" viewpoint and provide an explanation of the religious phenomenon, seeking truth from the facts, from the point of view of its social practice and social functions.

What, then, are the irreplaceable special functions of religion as regards man's life in society?

First is its psychological function. The reason why religions can get their adherents to keep going forward, wave upon wave, is precisely, as Marx said, that "religion is the sigh of the oppressed soul; it is the feeling of the heartless world." Man is not only a material being, he is also a spiritual being; he is not only a rational being but is also an emotional being. Pressure and the feeling of exhaustion, good fortune and happiness, are all subjective reflections of the heart in the face of reality. Very many people, when faced with the various forms of misfortune and oppression in their lives, need to

seek consolation through religion. Marx said that, since religious suffering is the expression of real suffering, it is also a protest against this kind of suffering. Sometimes, atheism and science have no way of overcoming the fear of death of the masses. Religion, however, can do this. Revolutionaries can face death calmly for the sake of the Communist cause, but the common people have to believe that there is rebirth and judgment, and we should show understanding of this. This is because the management thinking of a party in power ought to allow for different interests to group together and different faiths to co-exist. Today, there are beautiful contents among the inverted fantastical forms of religion; even more importantly, the self-restraint and personal integrity of religion are the points by which it renders service to socialism.

Next is its function of morality. At a time when idealism has generally been lost and utilitarianism has everywhere become rampant, religion is a way of life that maintains belief in morality, just as in the sixteenth century when the rapid growth of the industrial civilisation led to the spread of a desire for material things, it was the Protestant ethic which propped up and restored the western moral character. Society cannot be without law, still less can it be without morality: law and morality are like the two wings of a bird - one is no good without the other. Morality is the basis of law: it prevents criminal behaviour in advance, while law, which is the guarantor of morality, punishes criminal behaviour after the event. Men, who have evolved from animals, embody an instinct that is savage and selfish, and simply relying on man's self-consciousness is not enough to keep his behaviour within bounds. If fear is excluded, men need the support of divine power to provide standards for themselves, which is the basis for the existence of the moral function of religion. The fact that religion encourages in man a spirit of doing good is the most important function of religion in its influence on his social life. If morality is eliminated from a discussion about religion, it becomes no more than an empty shell. The spirit of a people manifests itself in civilisation, the soul of a civilisation becomes apparent in its morality, morality is sustained by faith, and a people without faith cannot stand on its own in the community of the world's peoples - and China is no exception to this. If we want to give a lead to religion and socialism to adapt to each other, we should not simply dismiss the rational components of religious morality, especially such components as that of peaceful equality, or the rejection of evil and pursuit of good, which are contained in the ethical view of religious values: on the contrary, we should all respect them. During the early stage of socialism, the advanced civilisation of socialism was prepared to accommodate the reasonable elements representative of

other ideologies and cultures. Having everything the same colour is ideological autocracy - it is not socialism.

Third is religion's cultural function. In many countries where religion is the traditional culture, removing religion would be tantamount to having no culture. Christianity moulded the culture of Europe and America. There, the areas of literature and the arts, painting and sculpture, music and drama and moral philosophy, were all to a great extent the external manifestation of Christianity. Chinese culture is just the same, with such examples as the Three Great Rock Caves of Buddhism and the wall paintings of the Palace of Eternal Happiness of Daoism, while such words and expressions in the Chinese language as [those for] world, reality, learning from experience, consciousness, freeing oneself, indulging in fantasy, unimaginable, being "like a fire singeing the eyebrows" (a matter of extreme urgency) and repenting and being saved all have their origin in Buddhism. Religious culture is a part of China's traditional culture, and China's traditional culture is also a part of the advanced culture of Chinese socialism - an advanced culture which teaches us to govern our country with virtue. The reason for governing our country with virtue is to rebuild our system of belief in morality. The concept that "religion is culture" will dilute meaningless ideological conflicts, enabling people to understand more fully the rich content of religion and providing a platform on which believers, scholars and rulers can cooperate with each other. The reason for this is that religion by no means confines itself to expounding its teaching about God - it also influences society through its wide variety of philosophies, virtues, arts and customs.

Apart from the functions described above, religion also comprises many other functions such as providing service and engaging in public welfare. At this time of reform and development, the governing party should get religions to serve the socialist society and adapt themselves to the socialist society: it is only through establishing links between religion on the one hand and atheism, the class struggle and science and technology on the other that we shall be able to orientate ourselves afresh.

### 3. Developing the Marxist View on Religion in accordance with the Changing Times

We cannot go on treating the function of religion solely on the basis of an atheist viewpoint. If we do, it will always adopt a negative role towards us. Religion is a kind of cultural phenomenon, an indication of values, a way of understanding human life and the world. Such a huge system that has been the quintessence of human thought

for thousands of years cannot be summarised in such simple terms. We can only arrive at a comprehensive, dynamic and realistic understanding of religion's function in society if, in addition to relying on epistemology, we also apply the means of sociology, psychology and political science. Atheism is a requirement for the theoretical purity of Communist Party members, but it is not a requirement so far as the masses are concerned. So far as the struggle between materialism and idealism is concerned, if we are talking about the common people, this is a philosophical and not a political issue. We cannot go on treating religion as a tool of the class war. Nor does religion belong to any one class, though, from the day of its emergence, it has been closely linked with the class war. It has been used by the ruling class as a tool to control thought, but it has also been used by the oppressed class as a banner for mass resistance, a phenomenon which had its origin in the cohesiveness and appeal which are its special characteristics. The political affiliations of religion are derived primarily from the rulers.

We cannot go on treating religion and science simply as being diametrically opposed to each other. Religion belongs to [the category of] values and belief whereas science belongs to [the category of] tools and reason: while there may be clashes in the relations between the two, they can also help each other to move forward. We firmly believe that science offers a correct explanation of nature, society and the phenomenon of human thought; we believe that man is an autonomous animal, perpetually looking ahead to the future. The illusory nature of religion derives from the fact that there are still many questions, which science is, for the time being, unable to explain, and material needs which cannot be completely satisfied. Looking at it in this sense, scientific truth and religious faith are both products of man's practical activity and are both necessary to man's social life. On the subject of the opposition between religion and science, everyone is likely to recall the way in which the Catholic Church persecuted Copernicus and Galileo in the middle ages. In fact, however, religion also played an important role in promoting science and technology: in Europe during the middle ages scientific records were almost all kept in the monasteries, and the first shoots of science mostly appeared within the church. Copernicus's "On the Revolution of the Celestial Orbs", which resulted in an epoch-making revolution in planetary theory, was written on the basis of data from the monasteries. Kepler's mechanics of astronomy and Vesalius's human dissection also had close links with religious belief. Both Einstein and Newton were religious believers. Both were aware that there was no god on the moon: their reason for believing in religion was that they took the ethical principles of religion as the standard for their personal behaviour and the driving force



for their research. Of course, while we respect both science and religion, we can in no way go in the direction of either of the two extremes - either being passionately loyal to “a bogus science that only appears to be true” or wallowing in “a bogus religion in which one becomes uncritically spellbound”. Especially in the current period of exceptional social change, when social relations are at a stage of continuous change and adjustment, we must be all the more on our guard against the appearance and spread of bogus religions. Such perverse and unorthodox ideas as are incompatible with science and at odds with the teachings of orthodox religions should be jointly opposed by both science and religion.

Under the guidance of the correct Marxist view of religion, our Party must establish scientific and rational links with religion. Ever since the Spring and Autumn period [770 to 476 B.C.] when humanism was dominant, our country has for long periods operated an absolute monarchy, which has made relations between politics and religion in China different from those prevailing in other countries. [The question was asked:] “Is there anything under heaven that does not belong to the king: is there anyone other than the king’s minister whose writ extends to the very borders of his territory?” [and it was] this kind of political and cultural tradition which made it inevitable that all religion had to be dependent on and subservient to the imperial power. Throughout Chinese history, Buddhism and Daoism have both been under government control. This is entirely different from the way in which, in the Middle Ages, the Pope enjoyed the power and influence often thousand kings. In Chinese history, there has never been a situation in which a single religion enjoyed a monopoly of respect, or in which such a union of politics and religion existed as has happened in the case of Christianity and Islam, which is because of the cultural and ethical system which existed in China From Han times onwards, Confucian political ethics, based on the patriarchal system and blood relationships, had already become the guiding ideology whereby successive generations of the imperial court controlled society. The government laid down all kinds of laws to restrict and exercise control over religion, such as the issuing of diplomas [for Buddhist priests], the establishment of monasteries, keeping a check on the numbers of monks, etc. Such links between government and religion are the reason why there have never been religious wars in China: the existence of religion is, primarily, not a form of politics but is, rather, a form of the culture of society:

Buddhism and Daoism have, during successive imperial dynasties, been a factor and [source of] strength in social stability. In the history of religious development in China, Daoism was something born and bred on local soil, Buddhism entered China

by invitation, Islam was brought in by missionaries, and Christianity forced its way in. Speaking of the degree to which religions from abroad have merged in with Chinese culture, Buddhism has been the most successful. But no matter how strong a foreign religion may be, all religions, which have entered China may, without exception, merge in with the great culture of China.

Religion is a kind of faith, a kind of ideology, a kind of culture, and although it cannot simply be equated with politics, it can never be separated from it. Secretary-General Jiang's "three representatives" theory and his judgment about "giving a lead to religion and socialism to adapt to each other", which are sure to give a rich boost to the spiritual doctrine of Marxism, are a guide to our future religious work and work with the national minorities; they are also sure to revolutionise our traditional ideas about controlling religion and will thus establish the foundations for links between politics and religion on a scientifically rational basis. Once a new form of relationship between religion and politics becomes apparent, the appropriate organisational reforms and system planning will rapidly progress, and the basis for this progress will be precisely in the legal system. Once a new form of relationship between religion and politics becomes apparent, difficult questions related to popular beliefs and unorthodox religions will be able to be resolved in an orderly fashion, and racial harmony and the flourishing of true religion will forever be the natural enemies of unorthodox religion and splittism. Once a new form of relationship between religion and politics becomes apparent, it will be extremely helpful to the transformation of our Party from a revolutionary Party to a Party in power, which will be able to apply new forms of administrative ideas and patterns of leadership to the tasks of running the government, running society and running religion. And whether all of this will be successful will depend on whether the Marxist view of religion can keep up with the times.

(The author is deputy head of the State Council's Office for the Reform of the Economic System)

