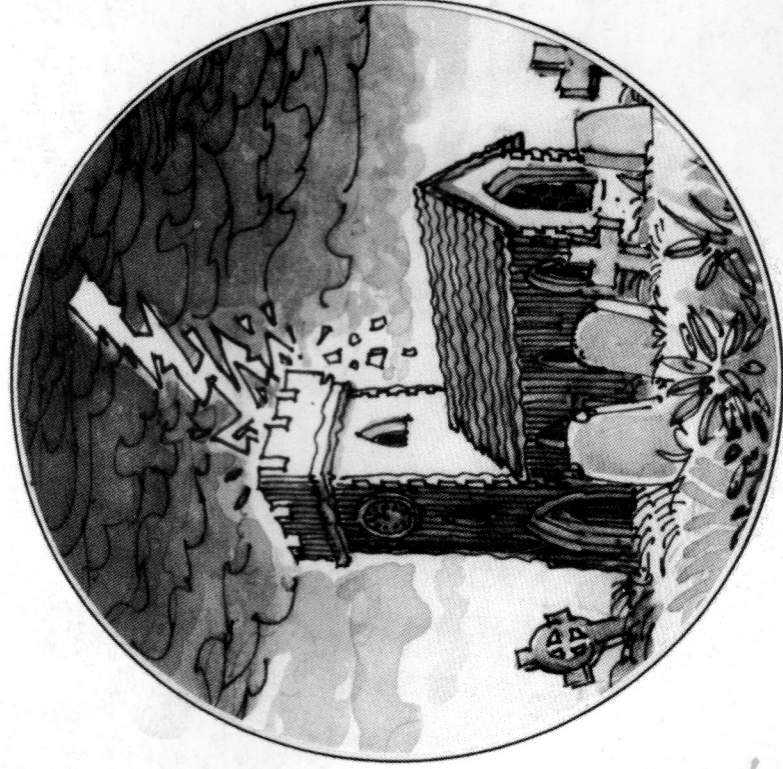


The Persistence of Religious Ideas in the 21st Century: a Contribution to a Debate



".....Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people." ^[1]

"Religion is a superstition that originated in man's mental inability to solve natural phenomena. The Church is an organised institution that has always been a stumbling block to progress." ^[2]

The Persistence of Religious Ideas in the 21st Century: a Contribution to a Debate

Revolutions Per Minute number 10

[1] Karl Marx [1818 – 1883].

Marx was a German philosopher and political economist whose works [particularly *Das Kapital*] attempted to analyse the nature of the capitalist mode of production. Marx believed that, by creating a class of industrial workers [the proletariat], capitalism sowed the seeds of its own destruction. Capitalism was simply an historical stage in the development of human societies whose culmination would be the advent of the classless society – communism. Marx wrote very little about religion as such. The quote is taken from a work entitled 'A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right' [February 1844]

[2] Emma Goldman [1869 – 1940].

Goldman was an American anarchist who believed in freedom, the right of individual self-expression, the freedom from prejudice and convention. Her writings on religion [although sparse] are to be seen in this context. The quotation is taken from 'What I Believe'[1908]

Revolutions Per Minute

BCM Box 3328,
London WC1N 3XX

07967 886257

revopermin@ukonline.co.uk
www.red-star-research.org.uk

The Persistence of Religious Ideas in the 21st Century: a Contribution to a Debate

Revolutions Per Minute number 10

Welcome to issue 10 of RPM. We are confident that readers will find the work extremely interesting, not to mention thought provoking.

Due to a lack of time and money it has been necessary to restrict our analysis to Britain, particularly England and Wales. We have not, however, ignored international developments and in chapter five attempts have been made to locate the growth of Islam in Britain to developments in the rest of the World.

The title was deliberately chosen to include 'a contribution to a debate.' This is because we want to see readers make one and even before going to print we received an article on 'the wrongs done by the Christian right' which has been included at the back. Future contributions would, with the person's permission, go on the web-site connected to RPM, at www.red-star-research.org.uk. We look forward to receiving them.

Major contributors to this issue are Jim Fox, Jon Mendel, Steve Green, Mark Metcalf and Tony Hall. Thanks to all of them.

Issue 9 of RPM: 'THE RICH AT PLAY – foxhunting, land ownership and the 'Countryside Alliance' sold extremely well. It was also positively reviewed in a number of magazines and newspapers.

Thanks, once again to all those who have taken out a subscription to RPM and an extra special thanks to those who've taken out a standing order – details at the back for anyone interested. The subscriptions include each issue of RPM as well as a range of badges, the most recent is one of Zapata.

The next two issues of RPM are already in production. Issue 11 will be on 'The English working class – radical and revolting' and Issue 12 on 'Making the NHS accountable to the people.'

If you have a piece of work you would like to be considered for publication then please make contact.

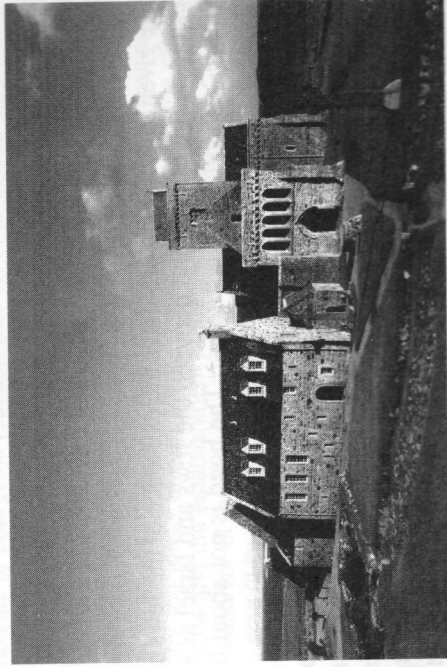
Mark Metcalf

CONTENTS

Introduction and contexts	page 1
Section one: God's role	page 4
Section two: Is there a God?	page 7
Section three: Religion and the State	page 12
Section four: Socialism and religion	page 18
Section five: Religion at the start of the 21st century	page 23
Conclusion.....	page 37
Bibliography and further reading	page 43
A contribution to a debate – ‘The wrongs done by the Christian right – US and UK’	page 44
Contact List	page 51

This booklet also appears on the web-site at
www.red-star-research.org.uk
along with all previous RPM Publications.

Introduction and Contexts



Iona Abbey

In this piece of work, I want to explore the persistence of religious ideas in a world that is increasingly based on the application of science and technology, a world which is far removed from that in which the principal religious faiths received their inspiration.

Why should it be the case that ideas which were essentially a product of a particular type of social organisation [tribal] in an environment fundamentally different to our own [desert] move people to carry out acts which are, at the most mundane level, incomprehensible to those who are non-believers.

Why, as we move into the third millennium of human existence, are so many aspects of our daily lives influenced by the actions of men who lived two thousand years ago [Jesus Christ], fifteen hundred years ago [Prophet Muhammad] or five hundred years ago [Guru Nanak/Guru Gobind Singh].

Further, what can we say about a modern conflict which has its roots in the notion that God granted certain individuals rights to a geographical area some three thousand years ago? What I mean by this is that a central aspect of Jewish religious belief is the idea that the chosen people of God were the Jews; the process of selection of the Jewish people was cemented by the covenant concluded between God and the Jews. The 'symbol' of this covenant is 'circumcision'; the 'elements' of this covenant are 'the gift of the Torah' and 'the gift of the land of Israel'.

"And the Lord said to Abraham: 'Lift your eyes now and look from the place where you are - northward, southward, eastward and westward; for all the land which you see I give to you and your descendants forever'" ^[1]

"Also I give to you and your descendants after you the land in which you are a stranger, all the land of Canaan, as an everlasting possession; and I will be their God." ^[2]

This promise given to Abraham pre-dates the existence of the Jews as a people and stresses the nature of the bond between the Jews and Israel as something other than mere 'attachment to territory'. The bond is not about the land as such, being rather more spiritual in nature.

According to Genesis, the land of Israel was given to the Jewish people for all time, but was conditional upon them observing the law as given to them by God. However, notwithstanding this, the link between the Jewish people and their land is itself, eternal and has never been diminished throughout the course of history. Indeed, it is true to say that there has always been a Jewish presence in Palestine throughout the ages culminating in the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948.

It is precisely because so many conflicts and antagonisms in the modern world have their roots in ancient texts that religious ideas should be of interest to socialists, anarchists and progressives. If we are to contribute to the battle of ideas in terms of the emancipation of the working-class in economic terms then, as Lenin said, we need to understand that this is also emancipation in spiritual terms; the freeing of the working class from oppression by capitalism is also the freeing of the class from oppression by religion:

".....the workers... take the side of socialism, which enlists science in the battle against the fog of religion, and frees the workers from their belief in life after death, by welding them together to fight in the present for a better life on earth." ^[3]

So, we need to be absolutely clear about the central questions in relation to religious faith: Is there a God? What is religion? Who makes religion? What is the relationship between religion and the state? Can religion ever be progressive? How can we characterise the religious ideal in modern Britain?

These are some of the issues that I will attempt to address in what follows; it should be remembered, however, that my guiding principle would be that outlined by Lenin:

"Religion is the opium of the people. This dictum by Marx is the cornerstone of the whole Marxist outlook on religion. Marxism has always regarded all modern religions and places of worship, and each and every religious organisation, as instruments of bourgeois reaction that serve to defend exploitation and to befuddle the working class."^[4]

[1] Genesis, chapter 13, verses 14/15 [Holy Bible, King James Version]

[2] *ibid*, chapter 17, verse 8

[3] V.I. Lenin 1870-1924]. Vladimir Ilich Ulyanov [Lenin] was a Russian revolutionary influenced by the ideas of Karl Marx. Lenin believed that the overthrow of the bourgeois state and the establishment of the 'dictatorship of the proletariat' was the necessary precursor of the communist state. Lenin was the leader of the Bolshevik Party at the time of its seizure of power in Russia in 1917. He developed a theory of the revolutionary party [particularly the concept of democratic centralism] which is still influential in sections of the 'left' today. Lenin was responsible for the establishment of the USSR and was succeeded as leader of the Bolshevik Party by Josef Stalin. The

Note on purpose

This piece of work includes a lengthy examination of the writings of Karl Marx and V. I. Lenin. Marx was chosen because of his attempts to get to grips with the enduring appeal of religion. Lenin is included since he was the driving force behind a movement whose impact on our lives in this [and the previous] century was immense. We would hope that the ideas expressed in this pamphlet would be vigorously debated in terms of the task that we set ourselves [that is, why have religious ideas proved so persistent] and not degenerate into sectarian farce based on our citing some thinkers and not others.

Remember that we see this work as a contribution to a debate and not the last word!

Section one: God's Role



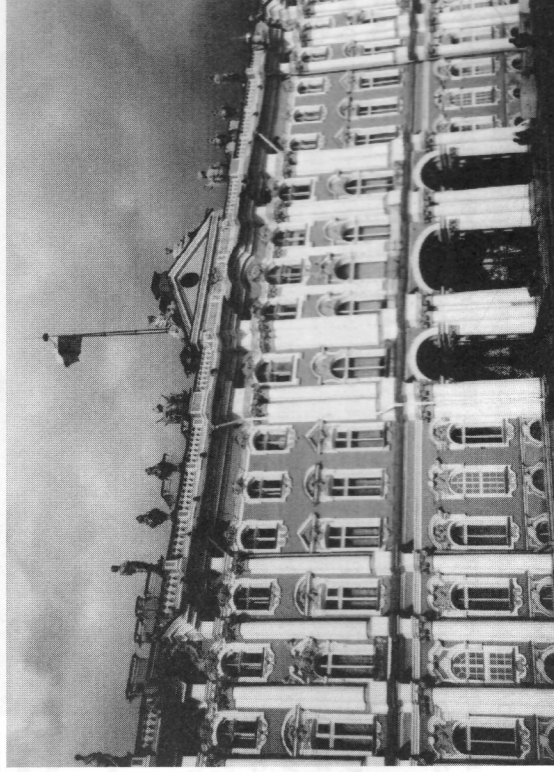
In this opening section I want to explore the 'idea' of God, as well as arguments about whether or not God exists. We should accept, though, that, for believers, God in some sense or other does exist; for such people no amount of rational-scientific discourse would persuade them otherwise.

In any case, our argument is not particularly with such people; our discourse is with the mass of the people who have, at best, a marginal and fragmentary interest in religious ideas [that is, we get married in a place of worship, we induct our children into a faith {however detached we ourselves might be from that faith}, we accept the formalities of the religious ideas at death]. Other than these formal observances, the mass of the people has very little active interest in the religious imperative.

The central point, then, is not so much the existence of God, but the widespread and unquestioning attitude that allows us to be manipulated into accepting that

oppressive and exploitative relationships are somehow 'natural' as ordained by God. As the famous nineteenth century hymn put it:

"....The rich man at his castle, the poor man at his gate. God made them high and lowly and ordered their estate."^[1]



It is this view of the religious imperative that we need to challenge; it is the notion that we put up with poverty and oppression in this world because things will be better in the next that is much more resonant amongst the mass of the people than arcane arguments about the existence of God.

In other words, we must challenge the view that God [religion] creates humankind and propose the opposite — that humankind creates God [religion]. This is the first step in unpicking the persistence of the religious imperative and a necessary corrective if we are to detach religion from its position of [apparent] importance in people's lives.

So, following Marx we start off from the idea that religion is an expression of material realities and economic injustice; religious ideas are used by the powerful to accommodate the exploited to the idea that their salvation will

come in the afterlife. They must put up with their wretchedness now in order to experience paradise in the future. It is in this sense that religion is the opium of the people:

“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. The abolition of religion as the illusory happiness of the people is required for their real happiness. The demand to give up the illusion about its condition is the demand to give up a condition which needs illusions.”^[2]

Thus, it is not the existence of God per se which is the problem for us, but the notion that religion is the tool that is used by the oppressors which allows them to deny to the workers the right to happiness and freedom in the here and now; this will be achieved in the next life. Marx recognises the power of the religious imperative — it does allow people a means of escape from their pain and suffering — but religion does not begin to address the fundamental cause of pain and suffering [capitalist exploitation].

Religion contributes to a situation where people forget why they are suffering. It encourages them to look forward to an imaginary future when the pain will cease, rather than striving to change their circumstances in this world.

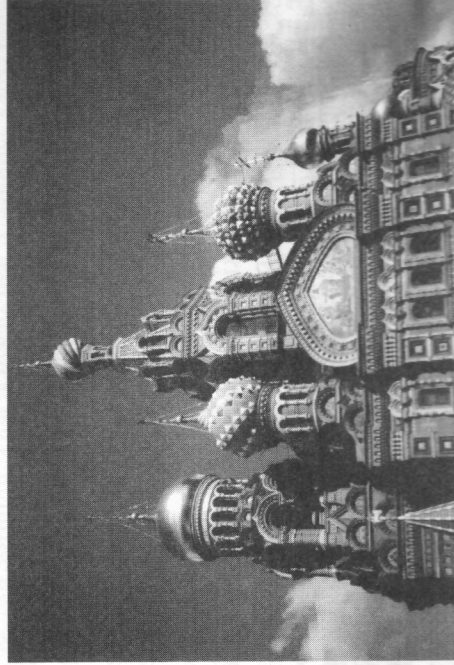
Thus, religion is the tool which helps to explain away fundamental inequalities which are rooted in material circumstances [that is, economic realities]. It is in this sense that debates about whether God exists or not are irrelevant. Changing economic realities will inevitably lead to the redundancy of the religious imperative; economic freedom will lead to spiritual freedom which will, in turn, lead to the death of God.

So, to sum up: God exists only for as long as the economic realities which created him exist; when these wither away, so will he.

[1] From the nineteenth century hymn ‘All Things Bright and Beautiful’

[2] Karl Marx, ‘A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right

Section Two: Is there a God?



The Church of the Resurrection, St. Petersburg, Russia

A joke: A fire fighter was seriously injured in a blaze in a factory; indeed, his injuries were so serious that it was felt that he would not recover. However, after some months of intensive care and recuperation he was able to return to work. His colleagues were eager to question him about his experiences and, in particular, his brush with death. He talked about a long tunnel and a blinding white light and a voice calling to him—he had seen God. His colleagues were amazed—what was HE like? His reply was that he was sorry to disappoint them, but SHE was black!

I know, very old and not particularly funny! But the very fact of this joke illustrates the popular view of God—white and male. And if people are asked about how they imagine God, they usually talk about a kind old man with a long white beard or as a sort of policeman figure in the sky or as a shepherd tending to his flock of sheep, and so on.

Whatever the origins of such images, they suggest that there is a [mostly unspoken] recognition that God, in some sense, does exist. What I want to do is to examine some of the arguments in favour and against the idea of God's

existence and to show why such arguments matter.

Arguments for the existence of God

Broadly, these arguments can be summarised under five broad headings: perfect being; causal; design; experiential; pragmatic.

- **Perfect being** — it is possible to imagine a perfect being, but such a being could not be perfect unless it included existence. It follows, therefore, that a perfect being must exist.
- **Causal** — everything that exists must have a cause. Since nothing can cause itself, and since the list of causes can stretch back into infinity, there must be a first cause — god. This was the argument advanced by Thomas Aquinas. Put simply, he argued that everything is caused by something other than itself therefore the universe was caused by something other than itself the list of causes cannot be infinitely long if the list of causes cannot be infinitely long there must be a first cause — that is, god.
- **Design** — everything that appears in the natural world — animals, plants, planets — show clear signs of having being designed for specific ends. Since this is the case, there must have been a designer — god.
- **Experiential** — a very large number of people claim to have had direct, personal religious experience of God. Experience leads them to argue, therefore, that god exists.
- **Pragmatic** — all human societies require a system of ethics [put simply a code of right and wrong] in order to survive. An ethical system is easier to enforce if people believe in god and the certainty of an after life.

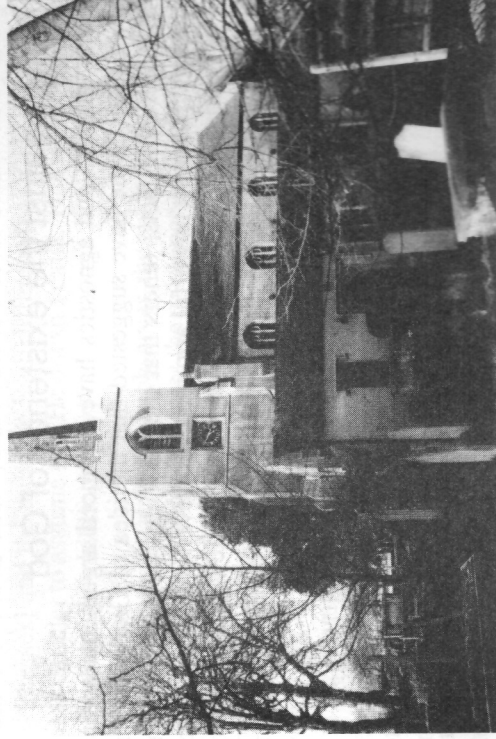
[Note: I am not suggesting that these comments are exhaustive; these are brief statements of often complex arguments. For example, there is a modern treatment of Aquinas's argument that does not imply that god must have had a cause. The interested reader is directed to the bibliography for further reading on this subject]

Objections to the arguments for the existence of God

- Just because we can imagine a perfect being, this does not mean that such a being exists. We cannot imagine something into existence; for example, we can imagine a world based on principles of social justice and fairness — nobody would seriously argue that such a world exists anywhere in the present time.

- If everything has a cause other than itself, then it follows that god must have a cause other than him/herself. But if this is the case [that god has a cause] then he/she cannot be the first cause. The first cause argument is, therefore, self-refuting. That is to say, that if Aquinas's first premise is true [everything is caused by something other than itself] then his conclusion [therefore, there must be a first cause, namely god] must be false.
- It is widely accepted that that the universe contains within itself evidence of design. Darwin's work on the origin of species and later works on evolution and theories of natural selection provide a reasonably complete scientific explanation of these things.
- It would be wrong to accept at face value claims about experiencing god since we cannot assume that everything imagined in mental experiences [which include dreams, hallucinations, and so on] actually exist. Such experiences cannot be publicly tested or verified. In any case, there may be other explanations for apparently mystical experiences.
- While it may be true that human society does need a system of ethics in order to survive, this does not necessarily have to be based on religion; in addition, it is absolutely the case that criminal activity has flourished in apparently theistic societies [our own, for example!]

There are other, more general, objections to these arguments for the existence of God. For example, each of the arguments is independent of the others. The



Stoke Newington Church, Hackney

first cause argument — even if it is true — would only prove a first cause; it would say nothing about the nature of that cause; it would not prove that the first cause was the God of western thought; it would not prove the existence of a designer or a perfect being. Equally, the design argument would only prove a designer, and so on. On their own, none of these arguments can prove that the cause, designer, or perfect being were the same — they could be three different beings.

In addition to this, believers claim that God created the world in seven days:

First day	God separated night and day
Second day	God separated sea and sky
Third day	God separated the sea from the land
Fourth day	God created lights to rule the day and the night
Fifth day	God created birds and fish to fill the sky and sea
Sixth day	God created animals and human beings
Seventh day	God rested

Leaving aside the internal flaw in this account [god separated night and day on the first day of creation, but didn't create the sun and the moon until the fourth day] we know from scientific observation that the universe evolved over many millions of years. And even if we accept the view advanced by some believers that this theory of creation is not to be read literally, it does not adequately address the scientific objections to such a theory.

Arguments against the existence of God

Philosophers, atheists and agnostics have advanced arguments against the existence of God. Some have suggested that the idea of God's existence is denied by observable facts; others that the very idea of 'God' is confused and incoherent. The most powerful argument, however, is that of the problem of evil. Put relatively simply, this puts forward the view that the following statements cannot all be true: 1) evil exists; 2) God is omnipotent; 3) God is all-loving. Put another way:

- If God can prevent evil, but doesn't, then He isn't all-loving
- If God intends to prevent evil, but cannot, then He isn't omnipotent
- If God both intends to prevent evil and is capable of doing so, then how can evil exist?

Another argument concerns the fact of human free will. If God is omniscient,

then how is it possible for a human being to make free choices? God will know beforehand exactly what a person will do in a given situation, so how can a person act in an alternative way to that which God intended? In this sense, free will is an illusion. The Islamic concept of '**Insh'allah**' [the will of God] encapsulates this dilemma; if every action that a human being takes is through the will of God, then how can this be compatible with free will?

If God knows in advance what actions we, as human beings, will take, then our destinies are beyond our control. Furthermore, if God knows in advance that a Hitler type figure will emerge in human history, why does He not take steps to prevent this happening? [this links back to the problem of evil as outlined above].

Other objections to the existence of God can be summarised as follows:

- If God is all-powerful and all-loving, then why does He allow pain, disease and natural disasters to exist?
- If God is just, then how can He allow the various injustices that exist in the world; if He allows these things, then He cannot be all-powerful and all-loving?
- How does the so-called fact of God's existence explain the number of:
1) religions in the world and 2) the number of different characteristics of God outlined by these various religions? Only one [or none] of these can be right about God.
- Since God is invisible [that is, He has never been seen by independent witnesses] and the universe is no different that if He didn't exist, then it is simpler to assume that He doesn't exist. This is the 'Occam Razor' argument [see bibliography]

Clearly, or at least to any reasonable observer, the evidence is overwhelmingly in favour of the proposition that denies the existence of God — it seems quite absurd to even put the question. But, does it matter?

Obviously, to believers, proof of denials is irrelevant — they believe in God and no amount of rational discourse is going to dissuade them. Belief, for them, is the ultimate act off faith. However, for those people who simply go through the rituals of belief, then these proofs are important. Their power lies in the fact that they are not widely known, hidden as they are in obscure academic discourses and books only known to the select few.

We state simply and clearly that belief in God is a logical impossibility and a denial of the recorded history of human history and struggle.

Section Three: Religion and the State



Religious statue in Novgorod, Russia

In the first section I have advanced the view that the religious imperative has been crucial for the continuation of a social organisation which has legitimised class inequality. To what extent, though, has this been a deliberate act on the part of the oppressors? Has the maintenance of religion been a conscious act on the part of the ruling elite or has it simply been a convenient, already existing tool that they have adapted to their own interests?

It is certainly [and indisputably] the case that religious ideas predate by a considerable period the rise of capitalism. Indeed feudalism as a state form gained much of its legitimacy through an appeal to the 'natural' order based on the notion that the social hierarchy was ordained by God [a notion not dissimilar to the caste system of social organisation in Hinduism]. Indeed, belief in the 'Divine Right of Kings' lay behind the notion that the Monarchy ruled through God's will.

This perhaps explains why the 1789 Revolution in France was seen as such a cataclysmic event; it questioned the legitimacy of the social hierarchy by proposing a system of social organisation [liberty, equality, fraternity] based on the material circumstances of life, rather than on an appeal to God.

In Britain, the transition from feudalism to capitalism was less fraught [at least for the old feudal aristocracy], since there was no bourgeois revolution in which the traditional ruling elite was usurped by the new industrial class.

This apparently seamless transition was achieved, to some extent, through the accommodation of the Protestant Church in England to the new social organisation. This was achieved through the 'fit' between the rise of an industrial mode of production and the central beliefs of Protestantism—essentially that god looked favourably on those individuals who worked hard to improve themselves and that divisions between the classes were a natural expression of God's will, 'All Things Bright and Beautiful' was simply a more up to date expression of the Protestant position on the social hierarchy. Thus, in the earlier period:

"God bless the squire and his relations and keep us in our proper stations" [1]

If Protestantism, to some degree, legitimised the new social order does this mean that it had played a progressive role in the development of the state form? Certainly, it had helped create a new set of social relations which had led to the development of an industrial working class with the potential to lead a social revolution whose outcome would be the abolition of capitalism. However, and at the same time, the religious imperative would ensure that this potential would not [in Britain at any rate] be actualised.

Thus, throughout the development of the capitalist mode of production, the Christian Church played an increasingly reactionary role in legitimising the most extreme forms of capitalist exploitation—in particular the fact of slavery and the use of child labouring in the 18th and 19th centuries.

This reactionary role probably reached its zenith during the period of the Great War [1914-18] when the Church actively supported the slaughter on the Somme, Ypres, Gallipoli, and so on. Not for nothing was the Church of England characterised as the 'Conservative Party at Prayer'.

This would seem to suggest that religion is a dead weight which can only ever be said to legitimise the exploitation of the working class. Certainly, it is difficult to see anything progressive in the actions of the religious hierarchy in Middle Ages England [the 15th-16th century] who ensured that access to knowledge lay with the Church since very few outside the religious hierarchy could read or write.

In addition, outside of the Christian Church it is difficult to see anything progressive in the actions of those Muslims today who want to revert to the penal code [Sharia] of the early medieval period or who interpret the Koran

as instructing women to cover their bodies so that not an ounce of flesh is on display.

In any case, the religious imperative can never be progressive in a Marxist sense since, by its very being, it denies that man is at the centre of existence; man makes religion, religion does not make man. So [for the capitalists] if God does not exist, it would be necessary to invent him. How else would it be possible to legitimise social inequality? Thus:

"The economic oppression of the workers inevitably calls forth and engenders every kind of political oppression and.....darkening of the spiritual and moral life of the masses.....Religion is one of the forms of spiritual oppression which everywhere weighs down heavily upon the masses of the people....."^[2]

Thus, it is certainly the case that throughout the development of capitalism as the dominant mode of production in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, religion played a crucial role in legitimising the ascendancy of the bourgeoisie as the ruling elite [one only needs to look at the novels of Dickens to appreciate this]. Indeed, it is possible to argue, as Edward Thompson suggests,^[3] that the rise of Methodism in the North East of England and elsewhere did much to deflect the revolutionary impulse of the working class in the early development of capitalism.

In the modern period, it is still possible to suggest that religion plays an important function for the continuation of a social system based on exploitation and oppression. The dominant form of Christianity in Britain [Protestantism through the Church of England] has an input in the symbolic expression of the State form: –

- The Church of England still has a privileged position in Britain; it is the 'established' church of the nation, a position it inherited when Henry the 8th dissolved the Catholic monasteries in the 16th century, during which he distributed 10 million acres of land to just 1,500 families. Many of these families' descendants are today major landowners.^[4]
- The head of state [the monarch] is required to be a member of that religion; she or he may not marry a catholic
- The head of state is also the 'head' of the Church of England; she or he has the right [exercised through the Prime Minister] to appoint senior officers of the church
- The 26 most senior Bishops of the Church of England have a seat and vote in Parliament as 'Lords Spiritual' representing the 'episcopate' in the House of Lords

- It is claimed by those who defend the established church that it is one of the 'three great pillars of British society' [the other two being the monarchy and parliament]. For a former Bishop of London [Mandell Creighton] the idea of a national religion is based upon the premise that it constitutes:

".....a recognition of the supreme law of God. Without the National Church there cannot be that."

General Synod Members vote to keep system established by Henry VIII for the selection of bishops

Church backs PM's right to choose

Stephen Bates Religious affairs correspondent

The Church of England's general synod has voted today to allow the prime minister and the bishops to make the ultimate say in choosing its bishops after senior clerics threatened to resign to appoint its own leaders to the vacant posts in the established church.

In a two hour debate at the end of the 1997 synod, the Church of England's highest governing body, the position was said to be like the woolly jumper of a man who has been asked to work the position and the whole community at a single thread and the whole community at the same time.

The vote was a landmark in the establishment of the state church.

The church's scheduled vote on the role of its senior bishops to defend the state's role in their appointment was a landmark in the establishment of the state church.

The vote was a landmark in the establishment of the state church.

system, inaugurated by Henry VIII, was reinforced by the Act of Supremacy of 1534, which gave the monarch the right to appoint and remove bishops. "If we were to go ahead, we would be proposing to change the system which has been in place for 450 years," said Michael Trenchard, the bishop of Exeter, who said the church's role in the state was a "unique and special" one.

Michael Trenchard, the bishop of Exeter, who said the church's role in the state was a "unique and special" one.

He was supported by Kenneth Stevenson, the bishop of Salisbury, who said the church's role in the state was a "unique and special" one.

He was supported by Kenneth Stevenson, the bishop of Salisbury, who said the church's role in the state was a "unique and special" one.

He was supported by Kenneth Stevenson, the bishop of Salisbury, who said the church's role in the state was a "unique and special" one.



In terms of education the influence of the established church is obvious

- There are 4,774 Church of England schools in the country; these comprise 20% of state schools in England
- In the independent sector of education around 1000 of the 1300 schools have a Church of England ethos
- 18% of all primary and 5% of secondary students attend Church of England schools; these schools are referred to by the government as 'the jewel in the state sector crown'.
- The Church of England Board of Education has been instrumental in ensuring that a daily act of collective worship is enshrined in law as an obligation of all state schools

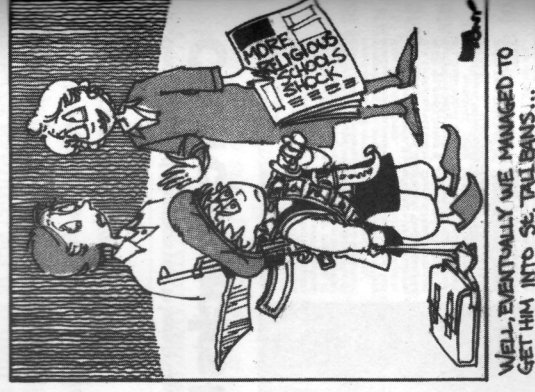
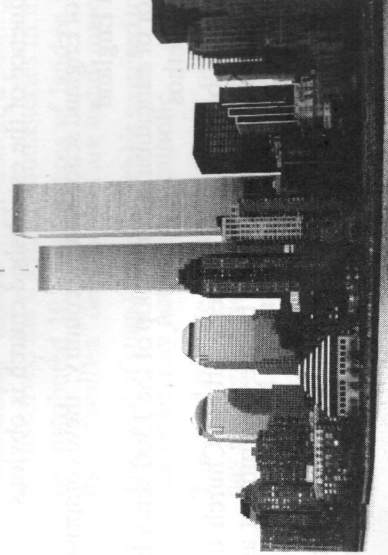
- This board is equally concerned with the position of Religious Education within the school curriculum; this, as noted earlier, is the only school subject which must be taught in all state schools.

There must be many parents who have no religious convictions, and never attend church, who are prepared to submit their children to attendance at a school in which religion plays a daily part in their children's education.

So whilst it could be argued that religion, for most people, is largely a question of accepting the formal structures of the religious imperative, the importance of its symbolism should not be underestimated. The acceptance of the abstract notion of an 'afterlife' where real social injustice is addressed is still a very powerful impulse in directing individual action.

Indeed, the most powerful weapon used by the hierarchy in Iran during the Iran/Iraq conflict of the mid-1980's, was the notion that soldiers killed on the battlefield would be accepted into paradise.

This notion also partly explains why a number of individuals were prepared to sacrifice themselves and others in the September 11, 2001 attack by Islamic militants on New York and elsewhere.^[5]



To sum up, then, the promise of a freedom in the 'afterlife' [however illusory this may be] allows ruling elites to manipulate the mass of the people into accepting social injustice and exploitation in this life. This acceptance can take many forms,

ranging from a formal adherence to religious ritual to acts of individual terrorism and ritual suicide.

This makes the words of Marx [written in 1844] as relevant today as they were then; it is only when the mass of the people accept that being determines consciousness and that humankind makes religion that real emancipation is possible:

"The criticism of religion disillusions man, so that he will think, act, and fashion his reality like a man who has discarded his illusions and regained his senses, so that he will move around himself as his own true Sun."^[6]

Or to put the question in another way:

"Humankind will only be free when the last prince is hanged by the entrails of the last bishop"^[7]

[1] From an eighteenth century sampler [wall-hanging]

[2] V.I. Lenin, 'Socialism and Religion'

[3] E.P. Thompson, 'The Making of the English Working Class' [1968], Chapter 11

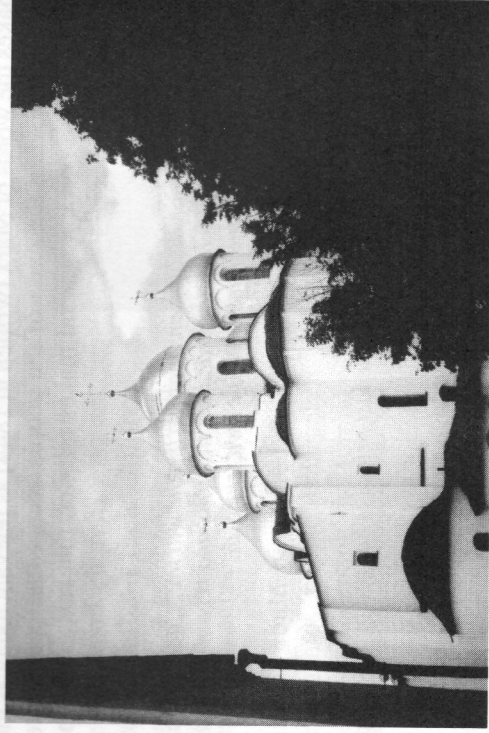
[4] RPM 9: 'The Rich at Play – foxhunting, land ownership and the 'Countryside Alliance' May 2002

[5] I am not suggesting that these relatively brief comments are exhaustive; I have attempted a summary of often complex arguments. For further reading, please refer to the bibliography

[6] Karl Marx, 'A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right

[7] Jean Jacques Rousseau [1712 – 1778], 'The Social Contract' [1762]

Section four: Socialism and Religion



One of 52 churches in Russia's oldest city, Novgorod

In this section, then, I want to lay out the socialist position relatively briefly before moving on to a discussion of religion in the world today.

I should point out the central proposition – the method proposed by Marx [that is, historical materialism] lies in fundamental opposition to religion; for Marx and Marxists the economic emancipation of the working class is also its emancipation in the realm of the spiritual.

I have already suggested that Marx's general view on the religious imperative is most succinctly presented in his 'Contribution.....'^[1] It should, perhaps, be pointed out here that Marx actually said very little directly about religion. In all of his writings he hardly ever addresses religion in a systematic fashion, although he touches on it frequently in books, speeches and pamphlets. The essential reason for this is that his critique of religion forms only one part of his criticism of society as a whole. For Marx, religion is an expression of material realities and economic injustice.

Thus, problems in religion are ultimately problems in society. Religion is not the disease, but merely a symptom. It is used by oppressors to make people feel better about the distress they experience due to being poor and exploited.

For example, what does the Tenth Commandment Forbid? The tenth commandment forbids all envious and covetous thoughts and unjust desires of our neighbours goods and profits.^[2]

It is these beliefs that are at the origin of the comment that religion is the “opium of the masses”. Marx’s view on religion is, though, somewhat more complex than this:

“Man makes religion, religion does not make man. Religion is indeed man’s self-consciousness and self-awareness so long as he has not found himself or has lost himself again. But man is no abstract being squatting outside the world. Man is the world of man — state, society. This state and this society produce religion that is an inverted consciousness of the world, because they are an inverted world.”

“Religion is the general theory of this world.....its logic in popular form, its enthusiasm, its moral sanction.....and its universal basis of consolation and justification. It is the fantastic realisation of the human essence since the human essence has not acquired any true reality. The struggle against religion is, therefore, indirectly the struggle against that world whose spiritual aroma is religion” ^[3]

In this Marx is stating the fundamental belief in the primacy of man. All action flows from the notion that man is at the centre of the universe — nothing exists that has not been brought into being by man. This is as true at the level of ideas as it is at the level of the material forces of production.

The religious imperative, therefore, is as much a product of man’s endeavours as is any other objects. It acts as a tool to blind the masses to the necessity for collective action in this world. This collective action is necessary; for there is no other world. If paradise is to exist anywhere it must be in this world for there is no other.

Religion, therefore, is as much a part of the apparatus of the state as any other state form [See Louis Althusser on ideological and repressive state apparatuses] whose function is to legitimise as ‘natural’ inequalities that are socially constructed.

Lenin, following Marx, sees the religious imperative in terms of the materialist conception of history. Religion is used by the exploiting class to blind the workers to the material reality of their exploitation, by calling forth their spiritual oppression:

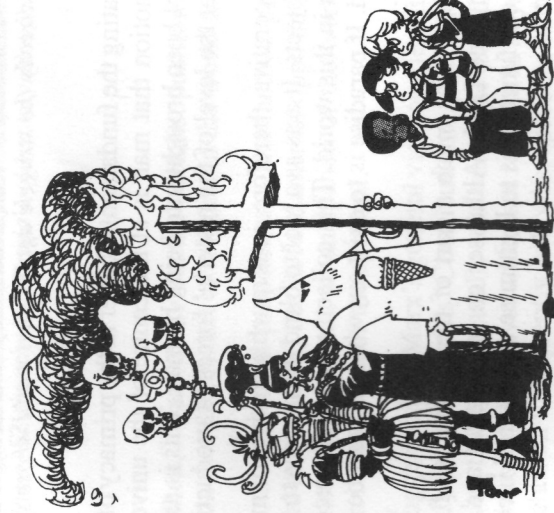
“Religion is one of the forms of spiritual oppression which everywhere weighs

down heavily upon the masses of the people, over burdened by their perpetual work for others, by want and isolation.

Impotence of the exploited classes in their struggle against the exploiters just as inevitably gives rise to the belief in a better life after death as impotence of the savage in his battle with nature gives rise to belief in gods, devils, miracles, and the like. Those who toil and live in want all their lives are taught by religion to be submissive and patient while here on earth and to take comfort in the hope of a heavenly reward.....

Religion is the opium of the people. Religion is a sort of spiritual booze in which the slaves of capital drown their human image, their demand for a life more or less worthy of man."⁽⁴⁾

For Lenin, though, the hope was that the creation of an industrial proletariat would lead to the casting aside of religious prejudice. Socialism would free the workers from the belief in a life after death by forming a class-conscious mass fighting for a better life here on earth.



"I SEE WE'VE GOT CONFRUSORY COMPETITIVE COMPARATIVE RELIGION AGAIN TO-DAY!"

For Lenin, religion was a purely private affair. By this he meant that religion must be of no concern to the state; no subsidies should be granted to the established church nor any state allowances be paid to religious societies. Complete separation of the Church and State should be a fundamental demand

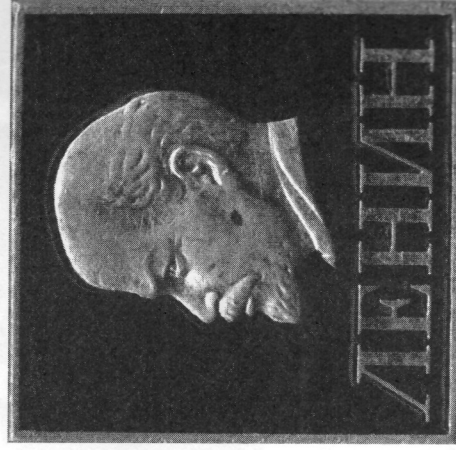
of the modern proletariat. This demand was to be a cornerstone of the Russian revolution.

However, insofar as the party of the socialist working class is concerned, religion is not a private affair:

"Our Party is an association of class-conscious fighters for the emancipation of the working class. Such an association cannot and must not be indifferent to the lack of class-consciousness, ignorance or obscurantism in the shape of religious beliefs.

We demand complete disestablishment of the Church so as to be able to combat religious fog with purely ideological weapons, by means of our press and of word of mouth..... And to us the ideological struggle is not a private affair, but the affair of the whole Party, of the whole proletariat."⁽⁵⁾

Thus, the programme of the revolutionary workers party is based on the materialist conception of history; this includes an explanation of the economic and historical roots of the religious 'fog'. This means posing the religious question not in abstract, 'intellectual' terms, but in concrete historical terms. For Lenin, the dead weight of the religious imperative that presses down on the workers is simply a reflection of the broader economic forces that are the central aspects of exploitation and oppression.



For this reason, the battle against religion will not be won by producing pamphlets or propaganda. It will be achieved through the creation of a class-conscious mass that will, through revolutionary struggle create the 'paradise' on earth.

Centrally, though, the religious question should not be given a centrality it does not deserve; winning the economic and political battle will consign the religious imperative to 'the dustbin of history':

"The revolutionary proletariat will succeed in making religion a really private affair, so far as the state is concerned. And in this political system, cleansed of medieval mildew, the proletariat will wage a broad and open struggle or the elimination of economic slavery, the true source of the religious humbugging of mankind." [6]

To sum up: Marxism is materialism and is, therefore, in fundamental opposition to the religious imperative. But religion per se is not the primary enemy to the revolutionary organisation. Religion only arises as a symptom in a social system based on the exploitation and oppression of the masses by a ruling elite. By achieving economic and political freedom; the working class will inevitably achieve spiritual freedom.

[1] Karl Marx, 'A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right'

[2] p50 'A Catechism of Christian Doctrine' 1999 edition from the Catholic Truth Society

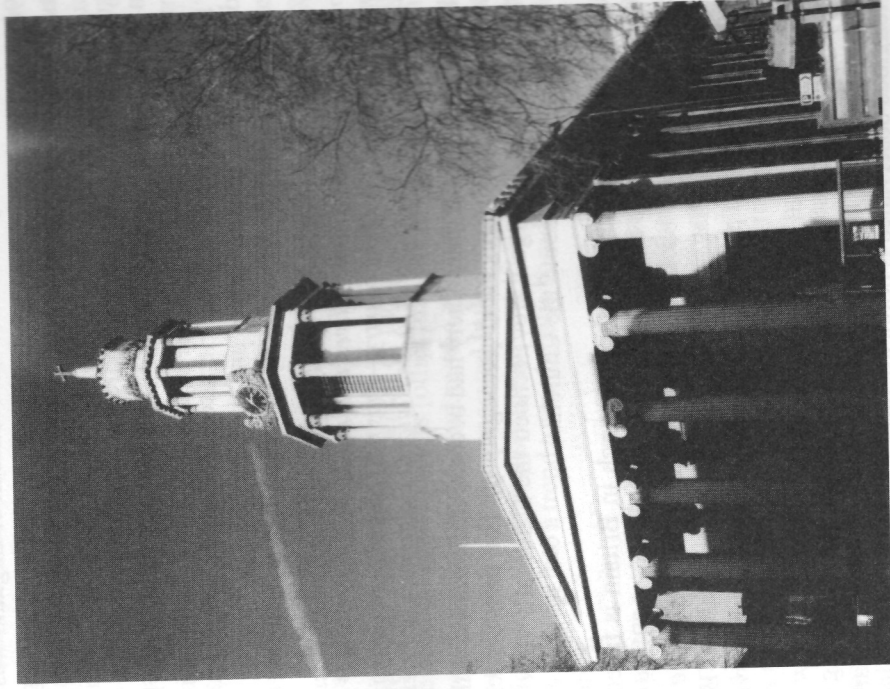
[3] Karl Marx 'A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right'

[4] V.I. Lenin, 'Socialism and Religion'

[5] *ibid*

[6] *ibid*

Section five: Religion at the Start of the 21st Century



In terms of statistics, there is no question about the general decline of Christianity in Britain. In the late 1990's figures for church attendance showed that only 1,045,000 went to Sunday worship, a decline of 36,000 since 1994 and the culmination of a trend that has been in evidence since the mid-1970's. Other figures — for baptisms, confirmations, electoral roll numbers, etc. — show a similar decline.

Not only is the Church of England in decline in both attendance and financial terms, but also in terms of its claim to uphold the 'moral values of the nation'. In the year 2000, the Church spent £23.5 million on its 114 Bishops; the

most expensive Bishop cost £138,713, while one claimed some £12,000 in 'hospitality' costs. This money comes from a 'tax exempt' source [the 'Church Commissioners' were instituted in 1948 in order to allow the Church of England to pay no taxes]. In addition, the Church of England was revealed [in the 1960's] to be one of the worst slum landlords in Britain, charging very high rents for properties that were in extremely poor condition.

Indeed, such is the state of Christianity today that the head of the Catholic Church in England and Wales [Cardinal Cormac Murphy-O'Connor] suggested in September 2001 that Christianity had been "all but eliminated" as a source of moral guidance in people's lives. He also claimed that people in general were "indifferent" to Christian values and the Church:

"In our countries in Britain today, especially in England and Wales, Christianity, as a sort of backdrop to people's lives and moral decisions — and to the government and social life of the country — has now almost been vanquished." Cardinal Murphy-O'Connor, speech to the National Conference of Priests.⁽¹⁾

The Cardinal also suggested that society had become demoralised with people seeking solace in alcohol, drugs and pornography. The then leader of the Church of England [Dr George Carey] echoed the Cardinal's views saying that there many challenges facing the Church.

Like the Church of England, the Catholic Church in Britain is faced with a steady decline in attendance at mass and a shortage of men willing to train as priests. This is against a background of growing criticism at the way in which the Catholic Church has approached the issue of child abuse. Between 1995 and 1999, 21 Catholic priests in England and Wales were convicted of offences against children.

Recent research has suggested that the Church of England is losing around one million members every five years as more people are dying than are being baptised. Religious observance is not being passed down through succeeding generations which means that a further decline in church attendance is almost inevitable.

The decrease in the numbers attending church and the eroded influence in moral guidance is surely an indicator that religion plays a less important role in some people's lives — that must obviously be conceded.

Alongside this decline there has been an increase in the numbers joining religious cults. At the same time, recognising that Britain is a multi-faith society, to what extent do other religious faiths structure their follower's lives? We shall now explore both these issues.

To what extent are religious cults an important phenomenon in Britain?

Religious cults tend to increase their members in times of crisis [economic, political, and spiritual] or in moments of great historical significance [millennial cults are an example]. People join cults when they believe that life has little or no meaning — they are driven to seek out meanings in a world which is [for them] devoid of moral direction. They have an attachment to a set of beliefs which drive them to feel that there must be more to life than the 'here and now', that human beings must have a reason for existence other than the daily struggles of everyday life.

Religious cults thrive in a period of what may, therefore, be termed 'moral vacuum' — when the established churches are seen as not providing spiritual and moral guidance.

There are signs that the last period of the last century and the beginnings of this have been difficult for cults [other than the more established ones], since there have been well publicised media campaigns against them, combined with the negative publicity generated by ex-members who have broken with them. However, this has also meant a drift away from the old traditional religious cultism into a trend towards cults based on environmental awareness and politics.

Increasing concerns for the environment and being eco-friendly have led to a growth in cults addressing green issues using the banner of the 'new age' and supporting the 'Gaia Hypothesis' which suggests that all things in the world are mystically connected. Such world views with their relatively simplistic answers to global problems are very attractive to those who believe that the current world order is threatening the future of humankind.

It is precisely these people who should be won to the socialist perspective of social revolution as a necessary precursor of liberation, rather than a dependence on half-baked and 'mystical' ideas about a retreat into 'spirituality' as an answer to the problems posed by global capitalism.

The appeal of cults transcends rational thought and scientific analysis; no amount of false predictions diminishes the appeal of cults. For example, the end of the world has been predicted by various cult leaders as 982, 999, 1665, 1900 [when 100 Russian brothers and sisters of death burned themselves alive rather than face the apocalypse], 1993, 1999, 2000, 2038 [Nostradamus's prediction], and so on.

These predictions may have more resonance in the modern period since we

have the capability, through nuclear, chemical and biological weapons, to destroy our world. Modern cults feed on this latent fear by always presenting an apocalyptic world view [divining mystical significance around the events of September 11, 2001, for example], often encouraging their members to be prepared to sacrifice themselves in the hope of eternal salvation [the followers of the Reverend Jim Jones, the Branch Davidians, and so on].

The simple fact of the matter is, of course, that our world will end at some point in the future [the scientific fact is that the sun will burn itself out one day]. The appeal of cults is that their leaders claim that they alone can predict the end of the world and that only cult followers will be 'saved'. Such simple minded analyses offer solace to those individuals who are searching for some higher meaning for existence.

One of the well-established religious cults is the Church of Scientology, with branches in many British towns and cities, including my home town of Sunderland. This cult was founded in the late 1950's by the science fiction writer L. Ron Hubbard. It started with a book written by Hubbard called 'Dianetics: The New Science of Mental Health'. This promoted the use of [questionable] techniques to concentrate the mind and increase mental powers.

The techniques set out in 'Dianetics' are still the basis of the cult of Scientology, although there has been some refinement and extension of basic principles. Notwithstanding this, the practices engaged in have been condemned by the mainstream psychiatric profession as being extremely harmful.

Scientology was incorporated as a church in the USA essentially to avoid paying taxes. Its structure as a church, though, means that church members at one level are not allowed access to teachings at the next level. It is argued that higher level teachings are said to be harmful to those who are not prepared for them.

It could be argued that the only 'harm' being done is to the pocket since the only way to progress through levels is to have an extensive course of training. At today's prices a complete course of training would cost upwards of £200,000!

The belief system of Scientology was written by L Ron Hubbard who claimed that all the negative aspects of our life [from poor memory to bad health] are caused by bad memories or 'engrams'. These can be removed by a range of methods from basic psychotherapy to simple brainwashing. For example, subjects are ordered to perform meaningless actions hundreds of times.

Subjects are then required to believe that engrams are not just the result of

actions in this life, but from previous lives as well. According to Hubbard, the universe is trillions of years old and that evolution has been continuing through all that time. The primary causes of engrams come through this constant evolution.

Scientologists claim that once all the engrams, past and present, have been removed the subject achieves a state of 'clear'. A 'clear' should have perfect memory, perfect health, and live forever. The fact that this was not the case with 'clears' led to a search for additional sources of engrams. These were identified as 'suppressive persons'. These [usually close members of the family] must be 'disconnected' — the subject thus severs all ties with anyone critical of Scientology.

Scientology claims that once its followers are in control of themselves through using its techniques they gain:

- Freedom from disease
- Freedom from the effects of ageing
- Perfect memory
- Immunity from radiation
- The ability to command others
- Infinite reincarnation
- Freedom from the restraints of space and time

None of these 'benefits' have been satisfactorily demonstrated to non-Scientologists.^[2]

Given the frankly absurd claims made by its adherents, how can it be possible that Scientology has so many adherents? The relative success of Scientology [and other religious and non-religious cults] is partly a response to the lack of guidance given by the established Churches in Britain to potential followers.

The degeneration and decline of the established faiths has led to a revived interest in the false world view propagated by cults; their often spectacular success in recruiting members is a product of the search for 'heart in a heartless world'

It is a manifestation of the failure of the revolutionary movement to win the international working class to its ideas. It is only with economic emancipation that the conditions for spiritual emancipation appear. And remember Marx's position on religion [and this would apply equally to cults]:

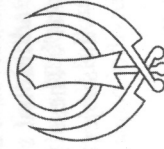
"Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions....." Karl Marx^[3]

A multi-faith society

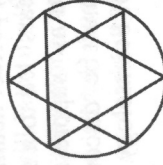
Whilst the influence of the established churches has fallen other faiths have seen their numbers increase or, at least, remain the same. This has meant that there is now an increasing recognition that Britain is a multi-faith society. As such, then to what extent do other religious faiths structure their followers' lives?



*The symbol of
Christianity: The Cross*



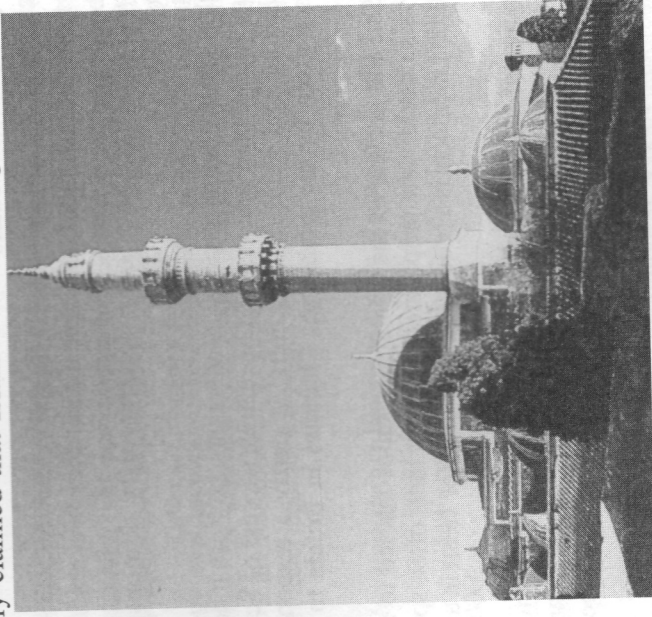
*The symbol of Sikhism:
The Khanda*



*The symbol of Judaism:
The Star of David*

While recognising that there are faiths that are important to their followers, Hinduism, Sikhism and Judaism, I want to concentrate on the extent to which Islam is a significant force in modern Britain.

It is widely claimed that Islam is the fastest growing religious belief in



A Mosque on the Isle of Rhodes

the world. It certainly claims many converts particularly in Britain — it is impossible to be precise about the numbers of converts but the Financial Times of January 23rd, 2002 claimed that around 10,000 British Muslims are white or Afro-Caribbean. There are around 1.8 million Muslims currently resident in Britain^[4] who attend mosque regularly. This compares with the estimated one million members of the Church of England who regularly attend Sunday worship.

The appeal of Islam in Britain is most strongly felt by the dispossessed. Those who have little stake or interest in society as a whole. For example, the 'pull' of the mosque is felt most keenly in those areas where poverty is endemic and unemployment significantly higher than that of the 'host' community.

For example, figures show that:



- Pakistani and Bangladeshi men earn around £150 less per week than white men^[5]
- In Rochdale 96% of the Pakistani community live in the inner wards of the town, among the most deprived areas in NW England^[6]
- In East London where there are sizeable Muslim communities, 37% of the population of London's poorest borough — Tower Hamlets — is Bengali^[7]
- 68% of Pakistani households are living below the poverty line compared with 23% of all households^[8]
- Pakistani's are two and a half times more likely than the white population to be unemployed and nearly three times more likely to suffer from low pay^[9]

It is in locations where being black in Britain is an almost wholly negative experience that the appeal of Islam has most resonance.

In addition, there is some security in being able to resort to the protection of the 'group' in the face of often extreme hostility; this is an understandable defensive reaction to the casual racism that is faced on an almost daily basis [indeed, this racism is so ingrained in the host community that the use of the term 'paki' is considered to be uncontroversial and even 'normal']

It should not surprise us that support for individuals such as Osama Bin Laden and groups such as Al'Qaida is higher in these areas than anywhere else in Britain. However misguided such support may be, it is firmly rooted in the material conditions of life — attacks on those who are seen to be responsible for the economic plight of groups and individuals is seen, in some sense, as striking back.

Since the popular view of Islam in Britain is informed by the distortions of the print and broadcast media, it is worth pausing for a few minutes to examine the central tenets of the faith.



*The Symbol of Islam: The
Crescent and Star*

Islam, the religion followed by Muslims means submission, which is submission to the will of God. A Muslim is a person who has submitted to the will of God, that is, a believer in Islam.

Islam is the religious belief established by the Prophet Muhammad after the revelation of the Qu'ran/Koran [the word of God] revealed to him by the angel Gabriel [Gibreel] in the seventh century of the Christian era [CE]. This took place near the Prophet's birthplace of Makkah. The people of Makkah reacted badly to the Prophet's message and he sought refuge [with a small band of followers] to the town of Madinah, where it can be said that the religion was firmly established.

This flight to Madinah is known as the Hijrah [migration] and took place in what was the twelfth year of the Prophet's mission [622CE]. This is the beginning of the Muslim calendar and so the Muslim year is referred to as AH [After Hijrah]. Thus the year in the Christian calendar 2002CE is 1380AH.

It is incorrect to call Muslims 'Muhammadans' since Muhammad is the messenger of God; he does not have the same status as Jesus Christ does in Christianity. Muslims worship Allah, the Supreme Being, the one and only God. Allah is the same God that is worshipped by Christians and Jews.

The revelation to the Prophet Muhammad was God's message to the people in its complete and final form. Thus, the Koran is literally the word of God and cannot be altered in any way. The Koran is written in Arabic [the language in which it was revealed] and is laid out in chapters [hadiths] in the order in which they were revealed [thus, not in any particular chronological order]. It is incumbent on all Muslims to study the Qu'ran as the revealed word of God.

The other source of inspiration for Muslims [though not of the same status as the Qu'ran] is the Sunnah [path or way] or sayings of the prophet. Muhammad is held up as the ideal to which all Muslim men should aspire — his sayings are held in great reverence by Muslims. In the same way, Muslim women are taught to seek inspiration in the life of Khadijah, the first wife of the Prophet.

All Muslims are united in the 'ummah' [community]; this transcends the boundaries of nationality and recognises the world-wide community of Muslims — Islam is an evangelical religion which welcomes converts, those who have submitted to the will of God.^[10]

Countries which aspire to create a state based on the principles of Islam follow a system of jurisprudence enunciated in the Koran and called Shar'iah [the path or way]. This is the system of law so often condemned in the western press.

As described by the Prophet, Islam is based on five fundamental truths or pillars:

- The declaration that there is no god but God [Allah] and that Muhammad is His messenger
- The establishment of prayers
- The payment of the zakat [tax]
- Observation of the fast of Ramadan
- The Hajj [pilgrimage] at least once in a lifetime

In addition, for Muslims there are injunctions on behaviour that is allowed [halal] and outlawed [haram]. Thus, the drinking of alcohol and the eating of pork are haram. It should be pointed out, here, particularly in the light of recent press coverage that there is no Koranic authority for the injunction that women should wear the Burkha; there is simply an instruction that both sexes

It is in experie
In addi
the 'gr
defens
[indee
term 'j
It shou
and gr
Britair
materi
for the
strikin
Since 1
print a
the cer



should 'dress modestly'.

Finally, in terms of these observations on Islam, the modern world is divided into two main divisions — Sunni and Shia — of which Sunni is by far the most numerous. This goes back to the succession after the death of the Prophet.

What is about Islam that makes it the fastest growing religious movement not only in Britain, but also in the world? Perhaps this is due to the imposition of a world view based on certainty and the notion of submission; if all human action is ultimately determined by the will of God [Insh;allah], then there is little that humans can do to influence events; all human action is reduced to the will of God and this includes such events as September 11th, 2001 and October 12th, 2002.

It is this certainty imposed in a world full of uncertainties, which is so attractive to followers of the religion.

The focus of people in the West since the events of September 11th, 2001 has been on the notion of 'jihad' in Islam.

What exactly is jihad?

Clearly the word has great significance for Muslims; it is an Arabic word

Islam
submi
the wi
Islam
revela
Gabri
place
badly
follow
firmly
This f
in wh
begini
[After



should 'dress modestly'.

Finally, in terms of these observations on Islam, the modern world is divided into two main divisions — Sunni and Shia — of which Sunni is by far the most numerous. This goes back to the succession after the death of the Prophet.

What is about Islam that makes it the fastest growing religious movement not only in Britain, but also in the world? Perhaps this is due to the imposition of a world view based on certainty and the notion of submission; if all human action is ultimately determined by the will of God [Insh;allah], then there is little that humans can do to influence events; all human action is reduced to the will of God and this includes such events as September 11th, 2001 and October 12th, 2002.

It is this certainty imposed in a world full of uncertainties, which is so attractive to followers of the religion.

The focus of people in the West since the events of September 11th, 2001 has been on the notion of 'jihad' in Islam.

What exactly is jihad?

Clearly the word has great significance for Muslims; it is an Arabic word

and has no precise translation in English [Arabic is not unique in this; many languages have words which cannot be directly translated into other languages]. Perhaps the best translation of the word is a true and unselfish striving for good. As presented in the Qur'an, jihad implies the struggle to achieve spiritual good. Thus, jihad involves changes in the self and one's mentality.

'Essentially jihad is the inner struggle of a Muslim to become a better human being, improve himself and his community'.^[11]

The jihad involves great effort to achieve righteousness. In this sense, it is an individual effort that involves being self-centred and self-interested. It is through jihad that the individual will find salvation and the pardon of God:

"The day will come when every soul will serve as its own advocate and every soul will be fully paid for what it has done, without the least injustice."

[Qur'an 16:111]

So, in this sense, the onus is on the individual to prove their worth to God: to engage in acts of good deeds — to worship God more often, to help the poor and oppressed, to stand up for people's right for freedom, to never tell lies or bear false witness, to stay on good terms with friends and neighbours — and to resist the temptation of committing sinful acts — adultery, stealing, gossiping, insulting people, cheating, and so on:

"As for those who lead a righteous life [male or female], while believing, they enter Paradise; without the slightest injustice." [Qur'an 4:124].

It is this aspect of jihad that is ignored in the West [and, indeed, by some Muslims]. These tend to concentrate on the martial aspects of jihad but, even here, there is confusion and misunderstanding. When fighting a war, there are clear rules and regulations laid down; war may be considered to be jihad, but only in the following narrowly defined circumstances: in the name of justice, to deter an aggressor, in self-defence, to establish the freedom to practice a religion:

"You shall strive for the cause of God as you should strive for His cause."

[Qur'an 22:78]

Fighting in the name of God is permissible [and sometimes necessary], but this does not mean that jihad is holy war. There is plenty of evidence from the Qur'an to suggest that war is never holy. Indeed, the very concept of Islam is the notion of peace [the word Islam in the Arabic shares the same root as the Arabic word 'salaam' which means peace].

This should not be taken to mean that Islam forbids war; as noted above, there are circumstances when war is permitted, but only as a very last resort. All other possible means of resolving a conflict must be explored before war is contemplated.

"You shall prepare for them all the power you can muster, and all the equipment you can mobilise, that you may frighten the enemies of God, your enemies, as well as others who are not known to you; God knows them. Whatever you spend in the cause of God will be repaid to you generously, without the least injustice. If they resort to peace, so shall you, and put your trust in God. He is the Hearer, the Omniscient." [Qur'an 8:60/61]

War is also permissible in cases of self-defence; against oppression, tyranny and aggression:

"Permission to fight is granted to those who are being persecuted, since injustice has befallen them and God is certainly able to support them." [Qur'an 22:39/40].

The final condition in which war is permissible is war in the name of God. It is important to note, though, that this is war in the cause of God; god does not encourage war, but in cases where the war is against an oppressor or aggressor, then this is a war for justice that is war in the cause of God: this is NOT holy war:

"Those who readily fight in the cause of God are those who forsake this world in favour of the Hereafter. Whoever fights in the cause of God, then gets killed or is victorious, we will surely grant him a great recompense. Why should you not fight in the cause of God when weak men, women and children are imploring: 'Our Lord, deliver us from this community whose people are oppressive, and be You our Lord and Master.'" [Qur'an 4:74/75]

Crucially, there are stringent conditions attached to the conduct of war; the enemy must be respected — barbaric killing of the enemy is condemned since all human life is valuable to God. Civilians must not be harmed in the fighting unless they are directly involved in the war. If victory is achieved in war, there must be no oppression or enslavement of the enemy. There must be no conquest or the control of enemy territory:

"God advocates justice, charity and compassion. He forbids evil, vice and transgression. He enlightens you that you may take heed." [Qur'an 16:90]

To conclude: jihad does not mean holy war, because in Islam there is nothing holy about war. War is tolerated in certain specific circumstances, but its

conduct is rigorously regulated. Islam is essentially a religion of peace:

"If the idol worshippers sign a peace treaty with you and do not violate it, nor band together with others against you, you shall fulfil your treaty with them until the expiration date. God loves the righteous." [Qur'an 9:4]

It is clear therefore that there is no Koranic authority for events such as September 11 in terms of jihad. Bin Laden, the Taliban and other 'radical' Islamists have simply 're-interpreted' the teachings of the Qur'an to their own political purposes of trying to establish economic and political control over whole swathes of the middle and Far East.

Rather than accepting this it has suited Bush and Blair, amongst others, to go along with Bin Laden's interpretation of Jihad. This is a very convenient notion for western leaders seeking to demonise a set of ideas, in order to justify their aggressive actions in the world, to their domestic audiences.

'Increasingly, Western popular perception equates Islam with the Taliban and Bin Laden-style terrorism. Many Western commentators do not particularize the Taliban, but condemn Islam wholesale for being intolerant and anti-modern'⁽¹²⁾

Presenting followers of Islam as fanatics intent on destroying the 'western way of life' makes it easier to engage in physical attacks on such people and also helps to marginalize the legitimate grievances of peoples such as the Palestinians, who can therefore be characterised as the aggressors rather than the victims of Israeli intransigence in the Middle East.

In terms, though, of our central arguments about the role of religion in technologically advanced societies, it is clear that Islam does give some meaning to those individuals whose lives, in very important ways, lack meaning.

It is hardly surprising that those who have least stake in society [the unemployed, the poor, the dispossessed, the discriminated against] are precisely those who are most attracted to religious ideas and even to what we may term 'Islamic fundamentalism.' These ideas do give some meaning to peoples' lives, especially when they can see followers of these ideas striking against some of those who are the source of their alienation — namely, global capitalists and its greatest representative, the United States of America.

In this respect, however, it has been the historic failure of those on the progressive left to win such people to their arguments that have allowed the religious and political right to make headway.

- [1] Cardinal Murphy O'Connor, BBC News 24, September 2001
- [2] Information about Scientology is taken from anonymously published papers 'What is Scientology' [2001] and 'The Future of Religious Cults' [1992]
- [3] Marl Marx, 'A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right'
- [4] The Guardian, June 17, 2002
- [5] TUC's Black Workers Conference, 12 April 2002
- [6] The Guardian, 25 November 2001
- [7] The Guardian, June 21, 2002
- [8] Department for Work and Pensions, Households Below Average Incomes 1995-2001
- [9] Labour Force Survey, Spring 2000
- [10] From the First Pillar of Islam [Shahadah]: 'There is no God but Allah and Muhammad is the Prophet of Allah'
- [11] p87 - 'Taliban: the story of the Afghan Warlords' - Ahmed Rashid, published by Pan
- [12] p211, *ibid*

The Rev. Ian Paisley is enquiring about a plot at a prestigious cemetery. The clerk told him: "The price is £10,000. I know it sounds a lot, but you won't be disturbed for 200 years."

Taking out his calculator Paisley did some rapid calculations. "I'll give you £10. After all I'll only need it for 3 days."

America in 2002. A history lesson.

"Why," asked the teacher, "did the Puritans leave England for America?"

A pupil answered: "So that they could carry on their religion in freedom in their own way, and force others to do likewise."

A Jew was forced to flee his own homeland, and go to Israel.

"Dear God," he sighed, "two thousand years we pray in vain to return — and now it has to happen to me!"

A young Irish girl was talking to the Reverend Mother about her ambitions in life.

"When I grow up," she announced, "I want to be a prostitute."

The Reverend Mother gasped and threw up her hands in horror, fainting in the process. When she awakes she asks "Did I hear you right? What was it you said you wanted to be?"

"A Prostitute."

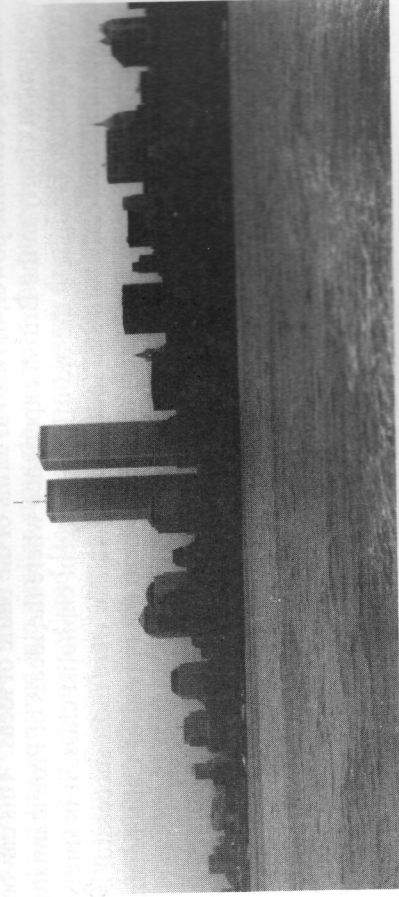
The Reverend Mother sighed with relief. "Holy Mary and Joseph," she said, "I thought you said a Protestant!"

Conclusion

"The idea of God implies the abdication of human reason and justice; it is the most decisive negation of human liberty and necessarily ends in the enslavement of mankind both in theory and practice. He who desires to worship God must harbour no childish illusions about the matter but bravely renounce his liberty and humanity." ^[1]

What I have argued throughout this work is that there is sound reason for individuals, whose lives are often without real meaning, to take solace [however temporarily] in a set of ideas rooted in societies whose driving forces are so different to ours. What should be surprising is that these ideas have not withered away in the face of scientific and technological advances over the best two to three hundreds years; indeed, they continue to have resonance and meaning for significant numbers of individuals.

It should be stressed, though, that these ideas are only of comfort for most people in times of personal [or wider social] crisis. For the most part, individuals lead their lives unencumbered by the forces that shape modern religious ideologies. Whatever the assertions to the contrary, the motives that drive people [whether they are the 'average' individuals or dedicated 'terrorists'] in their daily lives are the product of political forces impacting on us as individuals.



Indeed, those individuals who commit acts of terrorism such as happened on September 11, 2001 or in Bali on October 12, 2002 should not [and must not] be described as 'Islamic fundamentalists'. They are quite simply engaged in acting on a political agenda which sees the world as it is presently organised as being the result of an attempt by the most powerful countries in the world to impose their will on the least powerful. Events in the middle east, in south-east Asia and elsewhere can only be properly understood if seen in this context.

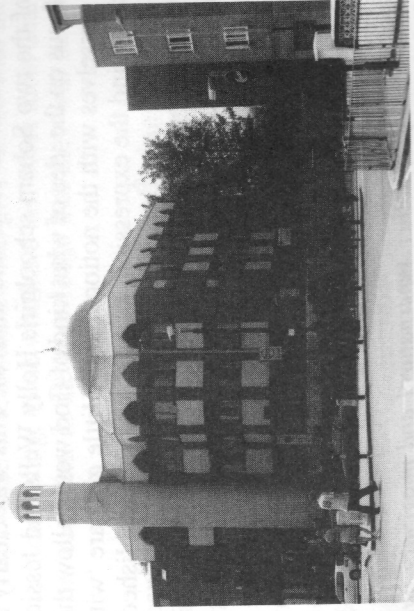
The notion that is prevalent in the west which argues that certain groups of Muslims want to assert their authority over the rest of the world [the creation of Islamic states which have their basis in Shar'iah] is partly an attempt to obscure the political and economic inequalities which disfigure the global economic system, but also partly about the need to impose meaning and order in an increasingly unstable reality.

What I mean by this is to say that for certain individuals the uncertainties of the modern world have led to nostalgia for a type of world order which probably never existed [and if it did, existed in a world qualitatively different to today's].

The notion that an individuals' life could be subordinated to some kind of external other [in this case, God] meant that life could go in predictable ways. You were born, you lived and you died – meaning was given through God and there was no impulse to think outside of this general world view. This way of thinking dominated human existence for many hundreds of years, its cosy certainties only being challenged in the past five to six hundred years.

These certainties are most fundamentally threatened by the advent of the most dynamic system of industrial production in human existence [capitalism] which brings with it a set of ideas which are incompatible with those that had gone before. The success of the emerging bourgeois class was not only in terms of winning economic power, but also in terms of the battle of ideas. This can be seen most clearly in the British experience where the ideals of Protestantism were quickly brought to the aid of the emergent capitalist class. It is surely no accident that early forms of industrial capitalism were most successful in countries like Britain and [later] the USA where the appeal of Catholicism was insignificant.

It is instructive to compare the experiences of these countries to those of others such as Spain, Italy, Portugal and parts of rural Germany and France where Catholicism remained the dominant religious form. This is not to place too much importance on the role of the Christian Church, but equally it would be foolish to ignore its role in the imposition of a capitalist mode of production.



Finsbury Park Mosque

This same process, I would want to argue, is exactly that which is taking place in parts of the economically developing world in the present day; the transition from one form of social organisation to another is a painful process which explains much of the turmoil taking place today, particularly in the Muslim world. Modernisers⁽²⁾ in this world recognise the importance of winning the battle of ideas; the harking back to a world based on religious certainties [the world of the prophet Muhammad] is the final attempt by conservatives to reverse the course of history. Hitherto existing experience tells us that they will be unsuccessful!

So, to sum up: What I am arguing is that religious ideas played an important role in legitimising the capitalist mode of production in Britain and other countries which had managed to break free from the shackles imposed by Catholicism in an earlier period. What we are witnessing in parts of the developing world at the present time is a similar struggle whereby the progressive arguments of modernisers are resisted [to a greater or lesser degree and sometimes in the form of armed resistance] by religious conservatives. The latter are not just inspired by a hatred of the 'new' but by a yearning for the certainties provided by religious ideology in an earlier, pre-industrial, time. All previous historical experience would lead us to suggest that the modernisers will win the argument, however long and brutal the struggle may be.

So, where does that leave us in terms of the persistence of religious ideas in post-industrial society? We would be foolish to dismiss the power of religious imagery; as individuals strive to seek meaning in terms of their own mortality and that of others, it is comforting to think in terms of an afterlife, where our daily struggles can be put in some kind of context.

As already suggested, the religious imperative has most resonance in the lives of individuals at times of crisis and distress. This was clearly illustrated in the deaths of the two Soham schoolgirls Holly Wells and Jessica Chapman; rather than focus on the idea of what kind of God would allow this to happen, we console ourselves with the notion that the little girls are 'with God'. The driving force behind the expressions of grief was the established Church.

Indeed, the whole iconography of grief was expressed in explicitly religious terms; we say that the dead [particularly children] are 'angels'; we say that they are 'at peace'; they are 'with the Lord'; that 'on their souls, sweet Jesus, have mercy'; and so on.

We might agree that:

"What is God himself? Another supernatural and imaginary intermediary between the natural instincts of man and his reason. Cannot man do what his reason points to, without being constrained by respect for a Creator?" ^[3]

However it cannot be denied that there is some beauty and powerful imagery in the religious message. For example:

"Let not your heart be troubled; you believe in God, believe also in Me. In My Father's house there are many mansions; if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself; that where I am, there you may be also." ^[4]

*"In the name of Allah, Most Gracious, Most Merciful,
Praise be to Allah, the Cherisher and Sustainer of the Worlds;
Most Gracious, Most Merciful;
Master of the Day of Judgment.
You do us worship, and Your aid do we seek"* ^[5]

*"The Lord is my Shepherd,
I shall not want.....
Yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil,
For You are with me.....
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me
All the days of my life;
And I will dwell in the house of the Lord
Forever!"* ^[6]

It is passages such as these which most resonate amongst those who refuse

to accept that human liberation [and, if you like, paradise] can only come on this earth. It is this sense of reassurance that gives those who have lost heart, the heart to continue living; those who have lost those most dear to them, the belief to go on, confident in the knowledge that they will be reunited in the next world.

And how can we deny to those who are suffering the pain of loss and bereavement the means where they are able to make sense of their loss as well as being able to share, and have validated, their sense of grief. By this I mean that if we take away this source of comfort, then individuals are even less likely to construct a meaningful existence for themselves and for others. Even in times of the most extreme suffering and stress, there are many people who are able to bear witness because they see their suffering in the context of God's plan for the world.

Thus, it is not surprising that many Jewish people retained their faith during the Holocaust of the 1930's and 40's. Indeed, they could only make sense of their own suffering in the name of God and His plan for the Jewish people in Israel.

It is in this sense of a search for meaning in a meaningless world that Karl Marx called religion the 'soul of soulless conditions', the 'heart of a heartless world', the 'sigh of the oppressed creatures'.

And it is this that we must address: to convince individuals that there is a meaning to their suffering in this world and that this meaning is rooted in the material conditions of their lives; that the sufferings they endure and the injustices that they bear can be addressed in this world.

And the answers that they seek are to be found in creating a world built on principles of justice, fairness and equality; a world free of dogma, superstition and religious myth; a world of co-operation, harmony and human liberation – an earthly paradise!

“.....so long as the people do not care to exercise their freedom, those who wish to tyrannise will do so; for tyrants are active and ardent, and will devote themselves in the name of any number of gods, religious and otherwise, to put shackles upon sleeping men.” ^[7]

- [1] Mikhail Bakunin [1814 – 1876], 'God and the State' [1920]
- [2] in using the term 'modernisers', I am not implying any support for a capitalist class in its efforts to impose its world view on others. It is a matter of intense debate as to whether human liberation necessarily means that there is a stage of human development [capitalism] which must be gone through. I use the term 'modernisers' in the sense of those sections of the community who challenge the dogma and superstition of the religious form.
- [3] Pierre Proudhon, [1809 – 1865] 'General Idea of Revolution in the Nineteenth Century' [1923]
- [4] The Gospel According to Saint Matthew, Chapter 5, verses 3 – 10
- [5] The Qur'an, Surah 1
- [6] Psalm 23
- [7] Voltairine de Cleyre, [1866 – 1912] 'Anarchism and American Traditions' [1909]

Bibliography and Further Reading

- Armstrong, K. Muhammad: A Biography of the Prophet [1991]
Crace, J. Quarantine [1998]
Goldman, E. What I Believe [1908]
Harrison, P. Arguments for and against the Existence of God [1997]
 The Holy Bible [King James version 1979]
 The Holy Qu'ran [translation 2001]
Hoover, A. J. The Case for Christian Theism [1996]
Lenin, V. I. Socialism and Religion [1905]
Lenin, V. I. The Attitude of the Workers' Party to Religion [1909]
Marx, K. Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of
 Right [1844]
Rashid, A. Taliban: The Story of the Afghan Warlords [2001]
Schick, T. The 'Big Bang' Argument for the Existence of God
 [1998]
Thompson, E. P. The making of the English Working Class [1968]

As well as the publications cited above, there are many internet sites dealing with the issues addressed in this pamphlet. The following is by no means exhaustive, but may be of interest:

On Islam

www.mcb.org.uk
www.submission.org

On Christianity

www.cofe.anglican.org

On arguments about the existence of God

www.infidels.org

On cults

www.arthurchappell.clara.net

THE WRONGS DONE BY THE CHRISTIAN RIGHT — US and UK

In the US, the Christian right exerts a significant influence on Bush's policies. This piece will consider how, though they have relatively little power to affect Bush's policies as regards the elite — after all, many of these people would have funded Bush's election campaign — they can have significant impact upon Bush's policies towards the most vulnerable members of society.

We will discuss how the anti-woman and anti-gay beliefs of the US Christian right have contributed to many of the problems faced by these groups. As a result of the Christian right's campaigning, it has become harder to get 'controversial' medical treatments such as abortion or drugs for HIV/AIDS in the US^[1], especially for those who cannot afford to pay, and harder to get US funding for these treatments abroad.

Because of the continued threat of privatisation to the NHS, the Christian right poses a threat to the UK — these changes might, as in the US, go hand-in-hand with cuts to the more 'controversial' treatments. A more localised health service would also have more trouble resisting the pressures that might be placed upon it.

Though the Christian right in the UK is far less influential than in the US it will be argued that, as with racism and fascism, if we do not actively campaign against these bigots then we run the risk of their power increasing. This piece will therefore conclude with a discussion of such campaigns.

There are several jokes in this booklet; I will add one that is borrowed from a young Iranian stand-up comedienne. This comedienne used to open her set by saying that "Women aren't allowed in Iran... they're just not allowed." Sorry, I obviously don't have the timing... Anyway, for all their involvement in whipping up Islamophobia^[2], a similar statement might apply to the US Christian right.

Their stance on abortion is well known — they believe that the foetus is a person with a soul from the moment of conception and that abortion is therefore murder.^[3] What is less well known is how recent this belief is — for example, the Catholic Church's opposition to abortion is little more than 100 years old.^[4]

The internal contradictions that still persist in this belief can be seen in the fact that, for the Catholic Church, fertilised ova are counted as persons when it comes to abortion, but are not baptised if they are simply discharged from the body.^[5]

The Christian right certainly shows considerable concern with the 'rights' of embryos. They campaign vigorously against abortion clinics in the US, with extremists even going so far as to publish the addresses of doctors working there and facilitate terror campaigns against them and their clinics.^[6]

The Christian right can also claim a great deal of the 'credit' for the decision of USAID, the government agency responsible for overseas aid, to stop funding abortions and anything related^[7] — effectively, any service where the word 'abortion' is mentioned for any purpose other than denigrating the practice.

In the US, women have a constitutional right to use abortion services. This means that, for those women who can afford to pay for these services, abortion is at least theoretically accessible. Those who cannot, do not have any legal right to access abortion. Without a National Health Service, those who cannot pay for 'controversial' treatments in the US are simply left unsupported.

The radical feminist Catherine MacKinnon argues that the rights of women as women do "not seem to be what the law [has] in mind."^[8] Regardless of what one thinks of her general claim; it is quite clear that the rights of vulnerable, non-elite women as women are not what US constitutional law has in mind.

The US is currently involved in a lot of military action abroad. Where they have supported local militias, as in Afghanistan, an increased incidence of rape and forced impregnation has resulted.^[9] At the same time as US foreign policy is contributing to increased sexual violence against women in the Third World, the policies of USAID are impacting upon the most vulnerable women there by denying even those who have been raped access to contraception and abortion, unless they can afford it.

It is hard to see how people who claim such concern for the first nine months of a baby's 'life' can show such indifference to the postnatal lives of women. USAID, following policies advocated by the Christian right, is therefore complicit in the forced impregnation of women — Third World women who cannot access safe abortion are forced to carry their rapist's child to term or to have an unsafe 'back street' abortions. For all their supposed concern with the first nine months of 'life', the Christian right shows remarkably little concern for the life that can be lived by the female half of the population after birth.

We should first note that — though the policies advocated by the Christian right have a negative impact on almost all women through making their control of their own bodies seem 'sinful' — these policies have a particularly strong impact upon the poorest and most vulnerable members of society.

It is those women who are forced to rely on the provision of free or subsidised

family planning services that are hardest hit by the cutbacks and restrictions advocated by the Christian right.

So, for the US Christian right, one could almost go so far as to say women aren't allowed, period. Not only does their desire to control women's bodies extend to forcing them to carry children they do not want, they also seek further control of the sexualities of women and men. Even heterosexual sex is seen as something to be scared of, something that should be closely regulated.^[10]

Under pressure from the Christian right, the Bush regime is now focusing funding for school sex education on projects that include a 'true love waits' message — telling children to avoid having sex until marriage.^[11] Naturally, such messages are woefully ineffective — many teenagers continue to enjoy premarital sex. To those of us whose views are not corrupted by religious prejudice, it should be clear that this is not necessarily a bad thing. However, thanks to the influence of the Christian right, these teenagers will be less well equipped to avoid pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases. At least they can take comfort in the fact that their choice to have sex runs counter to Republican Party policy.

The Christian right's fear of sexuality has a sound biblical basis. One might note, for example, the injunction "that each of you should learn to control his own body in a way that is holy and honourable, not in passionate lust".^[12] Another aspect of the way that women are not allowed to be, then, is as sexual actors. While men will need to obtain at least some pleasure from sex in order to aid procreation, the same does not apply to women. Women are not allowed to let their bodies undergo "passionate lust". Women are not allowed, period.

There is a shockingly high incidence of 'hate crimes' in the US.^[13] Gay men and women have been beaten, raped, scarred and murdered merely for (what their abusers believe to be) their sexual preference. The US Christian right must bear some of the responsibility for this.

For them to be arguing that homosexuality is immoral and prohibited by God, in a climate of widespread homophobia and homophobic violence, is hugely irresponsible. Those who make more radical claims are even more reprehensible. Note for example Jerry Falwell's belief that September 11:

"happened because we've made God mad. I really believe that the feminists, the gays, the lesbians and abortionists who are actively trying to make alternative lifestyles are to blame...I point my finger at you and say 'you helped this happen'".^[14]

Such statements are provocative in the extreme. Those making such claims

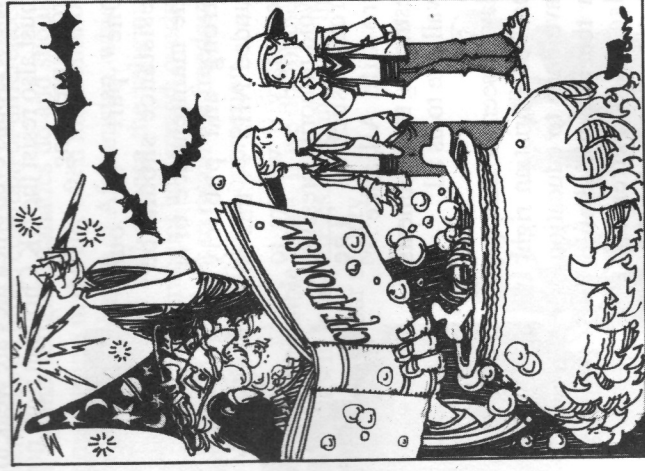
are just as responsible for homophobic violence as those spreading racist prejudice are for racist violence. The actions of those who take things further, such as the 'protesters' at the funerals of those killed in hate crimes, with their 'no queers in heaven' placards, are even more disgusting^[15] — imagine if the BNP had showed up at Stephen Laurence's funeral carrying 'no blacks in heaven' signs.

Not only are the Christian right remarkably unconcerned with the lives of women after birth, they show an active preference for making the lives of gay men and women miserable, or ending them. We should first wonder why these bigots are so concerned about what gay men and women do in private — for theorists such as Judith Butler, their need to impose such brutal regulation on homosexuality shows the strength of their repressed homosexual desires.^[16] The way Jerry Falwell associated the destruction of two giant phalluses with homosexuality has obvious sexual connotations.

In the area of sexuality, too, the US right's prejudices serve to influence

Bush's policies. This can be seen in, for example, moves to remove any discussion of homosexuality from school curricula^[17] (Bush is also critical about the teaching of Darwinism in schools^[18]) or to discuss only the negative sides of it, leaving young gay men and women less well-prepared for life. There are also, once again, moves to scale back state funding for treatment of what are seen (erroneously) as 'gay diseases' — HIV/AIDS being the most obvious example. Those who cannot afford to pay for treatment are left to suffer and die.

The stigma that the Christian right has worked to attach to homosexuality also makes the loss of life through diseases such as HIV/AIDS (to which they have contributed) harder to deal with — Butler writes about such deaths as "publicly ungrievable losses".^[19] Even more strongly than heterosexual women, homosexuals are,



HARRY RAFTER? NO, HE'S OUR LATEST
SCIENCE TEACHER.

for the Christian right, not allowed — period. Even when they die, they are not allowed to be mourned in peace.

As shown above, the Christian right in the US have had a very negative effect on: the status of women all over the world, and their right to control their bodies; the status of gay men and women in the US; the availability of treatment for 'controversial' diseases such as HIV/AIDS; and the standard of education in American schools.

These changes have had particular impact on the poorest and most vulnerable members of society, and especially those who cannot afford to pay for their own medical treatment. It should be clear that we do not want such changes to take place in the UK. In conclusion, I will therefore offer some suggestions as to how to deal with the Christian right in the UK.

The Christian right here is far less powerful than that in the US. However, this is no excuse for giving them free reign — just as we must continue to fight fascist groups even when they are weak to stop a resurgence in their power, we must also resist the UK Christian right now in order to prevent their prejudice from spreading.

One part of our resistance should be the maintenance of a strong and publicly funded NHS — this is necessary if we are to avoid minority pressure groups such as 'The Pro-Life Alliance'^[20] restricting the treatments available to us all.

Having seen the damage that the Christian right have done to education in the US, we should also be extremely cautious about allowing religious agendas into our schools. The use of public money to fund religious schools in the UK is something that

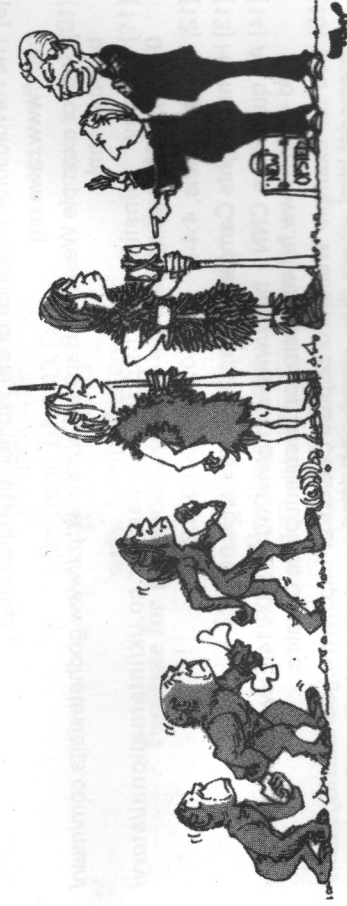


should be challenged Labour must not be allowed to expand the provision of religious education. We run the risk of raising a generation of children who cannot tolerate difference and who lack the knowledge of human evolution that is necessary to understand modern biology.

People are often cautious about challenging the religious beliefs of others. To some extent this is justified — we do not want to cause offence. However, Christians who blame the attacks of September 11 on those seeking alternative lifestyles, hold ‘no queers in heaven’ banners at funerals, or simply act in such a way as to encourage hate crimes or make intolerable behaviour appear legitimate do not deserve a tactful response. Bigotry is bigotry, whether or not it is cloaked in religious dogma.

There are groups already working in the UK to resist the Christian right, ranging from gay rights groups^[21] to pro-choice alliances^[22] to secular societies.^[23] Socialists, anarchists and ‘progressives’ should support their struggles and establish struggles of their own — the desire of the Christian right for conformity can best be challenged by a broad coalition of differences. National and international struggles against religious fanatics do and should overlap — for example, secular feminist groups in the UK often find common ground with the Revolutionary Alliance of the Women of Afghanistan, which fought for years against the Taliban regime and still oppose the religious fundamentalism of the ‘Northern Alliance’. These struggles will spread, overlap with others, and this is and should be part of the fight to retain the freedoms we still have and resist the move towards greater religious oppression.

Bigotry must be challenged, in the strongest possible terms. If we do not then we can be sure that the UK Christian right will work tirelessly to increase the oppression of the most vulnerable members of our society.



Creationism is being taught in some schools with Rev Blair's blessing

Further References

An excellent account of some of the online activities of the US Christian Right — <http://humanrights.tqn.com/cs/religiousright/>
Additional 'friend' site: NARAL (US pro-choice group) <http://www.naral.org/>
Additional 'enemy' site: Spotlight Ministries (homophobic UK church) <http://www.spotlightministries.org.uk/homosexuality.htm>

(Footnotes)

- [1] Westboro Baptist Church blames the gay lifestyle for HIV infection - http://www.godhatesfags.com/fags/Homosexual_Lifestyle.pdf.
<http://www.aineotheos.org/> tries to minimise the perceived importance of HIV/AIDS treatment and prevention programmes while also offering gay men the 'hope' that they could, like him, someday repent and become evangelical Christians. The Human Rights Campaign, working for LGBT equal rights, notes the difficulties in gaining funding for treatment — http://www.hrc.org/issues/hiv_aids/background/general.asp
[2] http://www.islam101.com/terror/falwell_defames_islam.htm or <http://www.armyofgod.com/islam.html>
[3] <http://www.abortionismurder.org/>
[4] Naila Kabeer - Reversed Realities: Gender Hierarchies in Development Thought (1994, Verso, London), 196
[5] Kabeer - Reversed Realities, 196
[6] This problem is discussed at - <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/americas/200848.stm>
See also - <http://www.armyofgod.com/AOGhistory.html>
for their incitement to violence against abortion clinics and abortionists.
[7] USAID - http://www.usaid.gov/pop_health/pop/mcpolicy.html
[8] Catherine A. Mackinnon - Feminism Unmodified: Discourses on Life and Law (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1987), 13
[9] The Revolutionary Alliance of the Women of Afghanistan
<http://www.rawa.org>
[10] See for example Westboro Baptist Church - <http://www.godhatesfags.com/main/purpose.html>
[11] Gaby Hinsliff - <http://www.observer.co.uk/international/story/0,6903,710335,00.html>
[12] Thessalonians, 4:4-5
[13] Human Rights Campaign - <http://www.hrc.org/>
[14] As quoted on CNN - <http://www.cnn.com/2001/US/09/14/Falwell.apology/> See also - <http://www.fallwell.com> — an excellent piece of satire.
[15] See for example Westboro Baptist Church at <http://www.godhatesfags.com/memorial.html> where they proudly talk about picketing Matthew Shepherd's funeral to remind his family that he will burn in hell, and provide a charming

picture of his face with flames imposed over it as a permanent online memorial. They also provide contact details of 'fag companies' and suggest that Christians contact 'fag schools' to make their opinions known. In that spirit, please note that you can contact the church at ghf@godhatesamerica.com or fax (954) 337-0400 with any comments on their campaigning.

[16] Judith Butler *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 137-8

[17] See for example Westboro Baptist Church - <http://www.godhatesfags.com/fags/fagsinschools.html>

[18] <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/americas/1866476.stm>

[19] Judith Butler *Antigone's Claim: Kinship Between Life and Death* (Columbia, Columbia University Press, 2000), 24

[20] <http://www.prolife.org.uk/>

[21] See for example Stonewall <http://www.stonewall.org.uk/>

[22] See for example Marie Stopes <http://www.mariestopes.org.uk/uk/advocacy->

Contact List

National Secular Society,

25 Red Lion Square,

London WC1R 4RL

0207 404 3126

www.secularism.org.uk

Gay and Lesbian Humanist Association,

National Office,

34 Spring Lane,

Kenilworth,

England CV8 2HB

01926 858 450

www.galha.org.uk

The Freethinker

PO Box 234

Brighton BN1 4XD

01273 680531

www.freethinker.co.uk

Institute for the Secularisation of Islamic Society

www.secularislam.org.uk

Rationalist Press Association,

Bradlaugh House,

47 Theobald's Road

London WC1 8SP

0207 430 1371

www.rationalist.org.uk

**Revolutions Per Minute Publications is
part of the Independent News Collective (INK)**

**INK
2nd Floor
Shiatsu Place
97-99 Seven Sisters Road
London N7 7QP
Tel: 020 7 561 0683**

The Persistence of Religious Ideas in the 21st Century: a Contribution to a Debate

RPM number 10

ISBN 0 9543014 0 2

published by

Revolutions Per Minute

BCM Box 3328

London WC1N 3XX

07967 886257

revopermin@ukonline.co.uk

www.red-star-research.org.uk

£3