

"The Future of Religion"

# THEOLOGICAL DEBATE IN YUGOSLAVIA

**W**hat is the nature and destiny of religion? Is religion primarily a human projection based on human misery, or does it answer some fundamental existential needs independent of historical conditions? Is it destined to wither away and die as man's oppression by man is overcome, or will it persist even as society becomes more humanistic? Does religion necessarily have to become ideology and align itself with forces of reaction and conservatism, or can it play a critical role in the shaping of a more just social order?

These were some of the questions addressed by sociologists, phenomenologists, philosophers, and theologians at a month-long course on "The Future of Religion" at the Inter-University Center of Post-Graduate Studies in Dubrovnik, Yugoslavia, April 3-29, 1977.

The Inter-University Center, located in a beautiful medieval setting on the Adriatic Sea, is a unique, international institution for studying the most recent developments in disciplines such as philosophy, science, politics, international relations, future studies, and development. Established in 1972, the IUC is controlled by some eighty member universities from around the world and draws on the resources of numerous scholars of international reputation. The course on the "Future of Religion" was the first program dealing with religion offered at this university, which is situated in what is probably the most independent and distinctive socialist country among the Eastern European nations.

Attended by some twenty students and visiting professors, each resource person giving one or two lectures and leading a seminar-type discussion, the course dealt with a wide range of subjects relating to religion and society. These included Hegel's view of Christianity, the Marxist critique of religion, the phenomenological understanding of religion(s), the Christian-Marxist dialogue, and various theological responses. While the course dealt with religion as a phenomenon in general, including both Eastern and Western religions, issues growing out of the encounter between Marxists and Christians largely dominated the discussions.

## Hegel and the Frankfurt School

The capable and aggressive leadership of course director Rudolf J. Siebert, Catholic theologian and philosopher from the University of Western Michigan, gave the course its distinctive character. Siebert's strongly Hegelian and Frankfurt school orientation were evident throughout the course, but particularly in his own substantive lectures on Georg Hegel, Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, Erich Fromm, and Jürgen Habermas. His obvious sympathies for the thought of the Frankfurt people were colored by his own specific interest in going beyond that tradition by developing a theory of religion in the light of critical theory. This he attempted to do by going behind the neo-Marxist tradition to its Hegelian roots.

Professor Siebert's first major presentation, "Hegel's Conception of Christianity: Origin, Existence, and Transformation toward the Future," set the stage for the rest of the course. For Siebert, modern revolutionary and emancipation movements must be seen in the light of the father of modern thought, Georg Friedrich Hegel, the philosopher of revolution *par excellence*. Siebert made the remarkable claim that Hegel was not only an orthodox Lutheran, and the last great humanistic thinker, but the last great Christian thinker of the West as well. Hegel's view of the dialectical movement of the absolute spirit from the universal, to the particular, and back again to itself through singularity, represents a radical transformation toward the future. While Hegel's emphasis on interiority and subjectivity may have short-changed the eschatological and historical nature of the future, his notion of the spirit opens up that future in a new way. Spirit as subjective freedom is the distinctive contribution of Christianity to the revolutionary cause. Siebert's interpretation of the revolutionary Hegel was hotly contested by liberation theologian Enrique D. Dussel toward the end of the course.

The critical theorists of the Frankfurt School, first established as the Institute for Social Research in Frankfurt in the early 1930's,

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had as one of their underlying tenets the refusal to create any positive images of the transcendent reality and of the future. This refusal, it has been said, was grounded in the Jewish religious tradition itself and was an attempt to prevent ideologizing. Critical theory is the attempt to develop a methodology based on a negative critique of all ideology, including religion. In all the critical theorists, however, there is a remnant of the religious dimension—a concern for universal justice and a belief in the finitude of man, nature, and society. These were the recurring themes of Siebert's comprehensive treatment of various members of the Frankfurt school.

It is this spark of the religious within the thought of these neo-Marxists that Siebert was interested in exploring. While each one negated the largely ideological nature of religion, most of the Frankfurt theorists acknowledged a non-ideological dimension in religion as well. Religion need not only be reactionary, but may become progressive in its critique of historical suffering and injustice. This is especially true for Adorno, whose "negative theology" points toward a de-ideologized wholly Other, the "imageless Unconditioned, the Absolute, without which the humanity of man cannot be realized". Similarly, Jürgen Habermas, a contemporary representative of the Frankfurt tradition, sees a "concrete and real utopian core" present within the ideological shell of religion".

It is necessary, however, in Siebert's opinion, to go beyond the "atheistic humanism" of the Frankfurt school to a "dialectical theism" in which the finite is seen within the infinite and the infinite within the finite. It is Hegel to whom we are indebted for such a dialectical approach to religion. We must go beyond the pure negation of the Frankfurt school to the "negation of the negation", in which religion can be seen as playing a positive role in bringing about social change.

### Marxist Reflections on Religion

The open and non-doctrinaire approach to religious questions taken by Yugoslavian Marxist scholars at the course reflected the unique and independent road to socialism that the country itself has taken under the undisputed leadership

of President Tito since 1945. Rejecting the centralized socialism of Russia and other Eastern European countries, Yugoslavia has determined to evolve its own particular brand of socialism known as "self-managing socialism". Yugoslavian society consists of six self-governing republics, divided along lines of nationality, and below this an intricate system of small economic and political units allegedly controlled by the people. A high level of politicization among ordinary people seems to be assumed.

The Yugoslavian Marxist thinkers questioned traditional Marxist assumptions concerning religion. They did not believe for a moment that religion would be eradicated in their society. They pointed out that religion is well and alive in Yugoslavia, with some thirty-four different sects and groups in existence; some of these have been born where they did not previously exist. The present interest in the sociology of religion in Yugoslavia reflects the attempt by socialist thinkers to explain the persistence of the mass religious phenomenon in a society where economic contradictions are supposedly being overcome.

Course co-director Professor Branko Bosnjak, philosopher of religion at the University of Zagreb, implicitly addressed this question in his presentation "What in Religion Dies, and What Remains?". For Professor Bosnjak, the source and root of all religion lies in the existential questions of death, life, and the meaning of existence. These concerns have a certain independent existence, apart from any given social system. As long as the fear of death remains and the desire for immortality persists, religion will persist regardless of the socio-economic system. Because every religion transcends the real world and tends toward the eschaton, "no social system can signify an obstacle for religion".

The irony implicit in Bosnjak's address was his emphasis of the private, existential nature of religion. This privatization of religion was also asserted by another Yugoslavian participant in the course, journalist-politician Ivica Mastruko. Mastruko, elected president of the community of Zadar for a four-year term, while tolerating the existence of religion, unequivocally rejected any political role for religious groups as such. To him, religion has to do with personal life, not at all

with social life. It is ironic that while contemporary theologians in the West are attempting to de-privatize and politicize religion under the impact of a new world responsibility, Marxist thinkers are attempting to de-politicize and privatize religion.

4) Professor Srdan Vrcan, member of the faculty of law at the University of Split, Yugoslavia, devoted his whole presentation to the "theoretical and practical problems arising out of the persistence of religion as a mass phenomenon in Yugoslavia". Also revealing an openness without illusions, Vrcan admitted, "I do not believe in the end of religion nor in its univocal revival. The future is more open and contradictory . . . . There is a future for religion as a minority position existing side by side within a galaxy of different meaning systems originating outside of the religious traditions." In Vrcan's view, religion will have to learn how to live in diaspora, upheld by a few committed people. He rejected any monistic world view and argued for a pluralistic approach to society. The contribution of the Church in an age of collectivity and consumerism should be an emphasis on (1) the value of individuality and personality, and (2) a view of transcendence which is not set over against immanence but is posed as an openness to the future fulfillment of humanity. In the words of Vrcan, "We live in an open and moving world which has not been finally created." Sects also have a contribution to make to Yugoslavian society. Crystallizing among the disenchanting on the fringe of urban centers, they keep alive the spirit of critique of the dominant culture.

Listening to Marxist philosopher Bosnjak, sociologist Vrcan, and journalist-politician Mastruko, it became clear, first of all, that they entertained no illusory "optimism" about the inevitable disappearance of religion in the near future in socialist society. Further, these Yugoslavian Marxists rejected a monolithic view of society and a doctrinaire, static, and closed Marxism. They preferred to speak about socialism and Marxism in more open and evolutionary terms. Categories such as Christianity and Marxism or Theism and Atheism were seen in relative-historical terms, open to reinterpretation and re-examination. Most striking for this observer was their attempt to define religion in private, existential, and non-political terms. As Mastruko

suggested, the individuals in Yugoslavian society must become politicized, but the Church as an organization must stay out of politics.

### Religions and the Future of Mankind

The implicit hiatus between the Judaic-Christian-Marxist historical agenda for human emancipation and the notion of salvation dominant in other religions, particularly in Hinduism and Buddhism, became especially clear in the addresses by futurologist Eleonora Masini, secretary general of the World Future Studies Federation in Rome, phenomenologist Jacobus Waardenburg, and Vatican representative Anthony Chullikal.

Professor Waardenburg, of the University of Utrecht, considered "what specific religions say about 'mankind'" from a phenomenological perspective. Penetrating into the deeper meaning of mythological representations in the four major world religions, Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, and Islam, one discovers different views of reality, mankind, and salvation. What all of them have in common is "the power to develop meaningful systems from which human life can derive significance". Through their different views concerning man, they contribute in different ways to the construction of reality and shaping of history. All of them by their very existence participate in the movement of past to present to future. All of them in some way participate in the movement of history.

Nevertheless, Hinduism and Buddhism view salvation in less historical-ethical terms than does the Judaic-Christian tradition. The rigid caste system of Hinduism, for instance, assures the independent existence and survival of distinct social groups within society, thus reinforcing traditional patterns and resisting social change. Buddhism, beginning as a protest against the caste system, substituted another type of hierarchy—different levels of realizing reality. Buddhism, like Hinduism, is interested in salvation in personal-individual terms rather than in social-historical terms. Religious experience lies within the individual soul as it experiences unity with reality on the deepest level. Salvation tends to be internalized and is seen as detachment from the empirical world.

With Judaism there comes a strong emphasis on historical and ethical universalism. Justice, charity, and equality are defined in social and historical terms. Universalism is interpreted in messianic and eschatological terms, thus allowing for ethnic and religious distinctiveness in the present historical experience. "In the light of cosmic universalism the only goal in history can be the broadening of the base of election until it becomes all-comprehensive, the final reconciliation of the nations and harmonization of the forces making history."

Inheriting much from the Judaic tradition, the Islamic religion also stresses the universality and unity of mankind. It was the goal of Mohammed to reunite all of mankind and restore the one primal monotheistic religion. Within Islam, however, there is a dualism between this universal trend on the one hand, and a confessional stance on the other. This confessionalism plus universalism expresses itself in extreme militancy especially evident in the period of expansion between ca. 622 and 850 A.D. The essential sign of faithfulness for the Islamic religion is personal piety.

What role do these religions play in the future humanization of man? This is a difficult question to answer and depends to a large extent on how one sees humanization taking place. According to Waardenburg, for example, Hinduisms might be willing to support socialism on the economic level, as long as this does not affect their system of religious belief. In Waardenburg's opinion, all four religions have a utopian element, and it would be erroneous to caricature any of them as static. In all of them something from the past reaches into the future.

The difference between the Hegel-Frankfurt-Marxist orientation toward social change and the more individual-personal approach was particularly evident in the presentations and accompanying discussions by Anthony Chullikal, a member of the Vatican Commission for Justice and Peace. In his two addresses, "Life and Personality of Gautama Buddha" and "Religion as a Motivating Factor in Social Change," Chullikal demonstrated the difference between the Eastern and Western approaches to religion and reality: "I have a great fear that East and West will never meet socially, spiritually, or psychologically. The East fears militant Protestantism."

Emphasizing meditation, silence, inward serenity, and listening to God's voice within man, Chullikal strongly emphasized the restructuring of the individual, and a person's relationship to his fellow human beings, as a necessary prior step to any restructuring of society. Stressing the individual overcoming of existential fears and anxieties, personal passions and hostilities, he put his emphasis on warm, loving, personal relationships and the dismantling of barriers between people. While "it is in no way inconsistent with the spiritual dignity of man to involve himself in changing the material conditions of life so that man can accept the gift of union with God and man", religion, according to Chullikal, has no social, political, or economic solutions.

### Meta-Sociological Views on Religion

The critique of world-dominating Western religion was implicit in the lecture by outgoing director of the Inter-University Center, Professor Johann Galtung. Speaking on the topic "The New International Economic Order and the Structure of God," Galtung saw the Christian view of God closely linked to the "social cosmology" of Western society. This social cosmology, Galtung's term for the deep cognitive structures which accompany a society's view of social, economic, and spiritual reality, is now crumbling in the West and means that the structure of God will also have to undergo a metamorphosis.

The dominating, hierarchical, and vertical social structure of the past 2,000 years is now changing into a more horizontal, fragmented, and pluralistic structure. Religion in order to survive will also have to "regroup itself according to these socio-economic changes". In a "multi-centric world" religion will have to become more pluralistic. Taking a middle position between the predominant tendency in the West to create clear images of the future and the negative theology of the Frankfurt school which rejects all image-making, Galtung suggested that we allow for a plurality of images of the future. If religion is willing to be thus restructured to meet the needs of a multi-centered world, it not only may survive but may experience a great revival.

Trutz Rendtorff, professor of theology at the

University of Munich, strongly rejected the assumption that religion is declining. In his paper, "Some Meta-Sociological Aspects of the Empirical Status of Religion," Dr. Rendtorff argued that religion could be replaced only by another religion, one set of beliefs only by another set. "There will be no future of mankind without religion. The question is only how the fundamental reality of religion is being acknowledged or suppressed." Before talking about the future of religion, we must develop criteria for detecting the presence of religion now.

Modern sociology is limited in its ability to detect and interpret the presence of religion. The problem lies in determining the empirical status of religion. Rendtorff's interest was in developing a view of transcendence and, with it, religion, from within a sociological-empirical framework but going beyond it. He did this by associating religion and transcendence with the reality of individuality within society. According to Rendtorff, modern sociological theories, including structural-functionalist approaches as well as critical theory, inevitably end up depersonalizing society. Society tends to be explained in terms of the whole rather than the individual. Even the Frankfurt school, while mourning the loss of individuality, cannot overcome it.

This reality of the individual, both beyond society and within it, is the domain of religion. Religion is here given a meta-empirical status. Religion is the form in which man can establish his relation to his beyond-the-world while at the same time remaining within it. Religion is, consequently, not so much a function of social change; it does not ultimately realize itself in human activity and political involvement, but in protecting the givenness of life. Rather than concentrating on shaping life, religious forms are needed enabling man to "establish a relation to meaning beyond himself in society".

### A Theological Response

The theological input at the course, as mentioned above, was largely dominated by issues of mutual concern for Marxists and Christians. Walter J. Bildstein, professor of theology at St. Jerome's College, Waterloo, Ontario, did not deal with this issue directly but gave a more gen-

eral treatment of the increasingly anthropocentric trend in modern theology. Paul Mojzes, a native of Yugoslavia, who was educated both in Yugoslavia and in the United States and is now associate professor of Religious Studies at Rosemont College, Pa., specifically addressed the issue of the Marxist-Christian dialogue. Head of the task force dealing with the Marxist-Christian encounter in the organization "Christians Associated for Relationship with Eastern Europe", Mojzes was well versed in the various stages of the dialogue historically and its present status, particularly in Eastern and Western European countries.

Mojzes' concern for "dialogue" at times seemed to soften his own stance, although he did stress the importance of entering the dialogue with a strong position. This rather soft approach was illustrated in his somewhat neutral stance toward political systems. In Mojzes' words, "As a Christian, I have no socio-political preference; as a person, I do. . . . Christianity neither accepts nor rejects capitalism *per se*. It neither accepts nor rejects socialism or communism *per se*, nor any other social system for that matter. That social system which produces optimal values for a given society in a given period deserves the support of Christians. . . . Sometimes a Christian may need to support capitalism, sometimes socialism, and sometimes a mixed system." Mojzes' assertion that Christianity must be a critic of all systems is of course incontestable. His split, however, between what one does as a Christian and what one does as a person, and the resulting tendency toward a type of neutrality as far as the Christian as Christian is concerned, seemed more questionable.

Mojzes did suggest that the contemporary Christian should support humanism, democracy, and social welfare (socialism), but it is of course the content of each of these terms that needs to be spelled out. For Mojzes, the word "anthropocracy" might describe the kind of world that both Marxists and Christians could work toward. This would be a pluralistic rather than a monistic Marxist or Christian oriented society. Here the above values could be more fully pursued, and the self-management of social, political, and economic life as well as respect for individual dignity could be combined.

The two Latin American theologians,



11) Rubem A. Alves and Enrique D. Dussel, particularly the latter, took a more decisive political stand. Alves, a well-known philosopher from Brazil who is renowned for his book *A Theology of Human Hope*, gave two lectures on Feuerbach and Marx and ended with a discussion of the Brazilian political situation. While sympathetic to the critique of religion by Feuerbach and Marx, he charged the former with anthropological reduction of religion and the latter with sociological reduction. He concluded his lecture on Marx by saying, "I agree with Marx that religion is always a response to alienation, but I don't agree with Marx that religion is always a reflex of alienation. It is rather a construction of a possible correction of alienation." Religious visions of utopia may have inherent in them concrete views of society and may thus become a radical force in the changing of unjust social structures. The task of the theologian, in Alves' words, is to be a midwife, to listen to the people, and to understand and interpret the hidden aspirations and religious visions of oppressed people.

That revolutionary movements can in fact come out of a traditionally conservative religious institution has been demonstrated in Brazil where the Roman Catholic Church has produced politically radical movements often inspired by priests. While Protestants, representing the nineteenth-century liberalizing force in Brazil, are now by and large siding with the foreign investment approach to development, it is from within the ranks of the Catholic Church that a radical critique of that society has arisen.

72) Even more passionate and decisive in his political stance was liberation theologian Enrique D. Dussel, now a professor in exile at the University of Mexico. In obvious disagreement with course director Siebert's own interpretation of Hegel, Professor Dussel charged Hegel with being a bourgeois philosopher whose philosophical and religious views must be identified with the European bourgeois state. In Dussel's opinion, Hegel's dialectic, while it stresses conflict and otherness of a kind, does not allow for radical otherness. The thesis and antithesis of Hegel takes place within the same structural bourgeois totality. There is no room for an absolute no, a totally other. Marx does not understand God as totally other; he is only aware of the God of Hegel.

Who is this God as wholly other? It is the God who stands *behind* the oppressed in society. This God can only be reached through the otherness within society. Religion is not merely a negation of ideology, as found in the Frankfurt school; it is a positive identity with the poor through praxis. Religion is not the abstract encounter with God, or with the universal, but the concrete encounter with the oppressed person.

Religion has an important role to play in the future of mankind if it is seen as part of the infra-structure. By the infra-structure of religion, Dussel means the "anteriority of the practical responsibility for the oppressed people of the present system". Religion stands, so to speak, underneath the present oppressive social structure, identifies with the otherness of the system, and strives for the utopian-historical future where oppression will be overcome. This it does in the light of the absolute God—complete utopia. Thus, instead of seeing religion as an ideological superstructure, as Marx did, it must be viewed as a vision of a future utopia, and as working for that historical future in its present identification with the poor through action. The difference between Marxism and Christianity is that for the Christian the historically concrete is ultimately seen in the light of Alpha and Omega, creation at the beginning and parousia at the end.

It became increasingly clear as the course on the "Future of Religion" progressed that no unanimity on the nature and destiny of religion would be reached. Despite the variety of presentations, the differences of religious commitments, and the wide range of political positions, there seemed to be a consensus that religion would not disappear in any immediate sense. Further, there was a tacit agreement by most that religion need not become the handmaid of reaction and oppression, and that it could in fact play an important role in the shaping of a more just and humanistic society.

A question that remains fundamental to the whole discussion of the future of religion, in this writer's opinion, is the relation of the nature of religion to its destiny. Before one is able to talk about the future of religion, one must talk about the essence of religion. Is there an inherent necessity, or truth, if you like, to religious experience? Is there an essentially religious dimen-



sion to man? The utility of religion in motivating social change in itself can surely never become an adequate apology for the truth and persistence of religion.

The second course on "The Future of Religion" will again take place in Dubrovnik, April 3-21, 1978 under the directorship of Rudolf Siebert, with Srdan Vrcan as co-director. This second course will be a continuation of the first,

on a large range of subjects relating to the general topic, and will take place in memoriam of the late humanist Marxist Ernst Bloch.

*A. James Reimer*

Mr. A. James Reimer, a Mennonite Christian, is completing his doctorate in theology at the Institute of Christian Thought, St. Michael's College, Toronto.

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