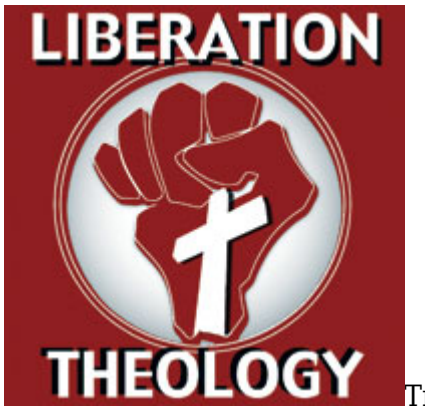
The Dead End of Liberation Theology

written by Dan Davison | August 4, 2021



Traditionally, the radical left has been secularist and anti-theistic. Today many left-wingers shy away from the critique of religion. They emphasize compatibility between socialism and religious ideas. Sometimes they frame this as recovering some "original" or "authentic" purpose of religion, which has been "corrupted" by capitalism or colonialism. Attempts to bring together religion and socialism are anything but new – the long existence of Christian socialism should make that clear enough. Nevertheless, this recent conciliatory turn on the left has happened for specific reasons.

Firstly, the failure of past attempts to combat religion head-on has led many atheist left-wingers to adopt a more "hands-off" approach. They hope that religious belief will simply continue to weaken as society progresses. In other words, it is a surrender born of ideological defeat.

Secondly, militant atheism is now commonly associated with public figures like Sam Harris and Richard Dawkins, who are liberals at best and conservatives at worst. This has produced a certain defeatism or unease over reclaiming it for the left. Such squeamishness is especially ironic coming from self-described "Leninists" when one considers how even the harshest "New Atheist" denunciations of religion pale in comparison to early Soviet anti-religious propaganda.

Thirdly, there are concerns about how to relate to ethnic minorities in the Global North and oppressed nations in the Global South with comparatively high rates of religiosity. Sometimes one hears the argument that propagandizing against religion risks driving away potential supporters of socialism. Other times, especially in those parts of the left steeped in postcolonial theory, one hears the argument that atheism and secularism are themselves "white European" ideas and that opposing religion is therefore "racist" and "colonialist".

Here I want to discuss an example I frequently encounter as a Latino socialist in the UK, namely European and North American leftists pointing to Latin American liberation theology in support of a conciliatory attitude towards religion. That is, I often hear it argued that the mere existence of liberation theology in Latin America means the international left should soften the argument for secularism and the critique of religion.

Admittedly, this discourse typically takes place in informal conversations or on "left Twitter" rather than in fully written polemics. It is therefore tempting to say that it is not worth pushing back against such discourse in substantial writing. It is as though I am fighting a mist-like opponent who never assumes a form solid enough to strike properly. Nevertheless, I believe this presents a valuable opportunity to revisit Marxist "first principles" on these issues.

To be clear, a political commitment to secularism (that is, the separation of religion from the state and from civic affairs) does not necessarily imply irreligiosity. Plenty of religious people support secularism because they rightly consider it vital for democracy and freedom of thought. That said, as I will go on to argue, Marx's own commitment to secularism arises not only from his political commitments to democracy and freedom, but also from his critical standpoint on religious beliefs and institutions themselves. As such, any serious attempt to grapple with the notion that liberation theology's existence means softening the radical left's traditionally secularist and anti-theistic standpoint requires one to consider the following. First, the role of atheism in Marx's broader perspective. Second, how this informs his commitments to both secularism and the critique of religion. Third, how the relationship between these aspects of Marx's ideas should inform our own attitude towards explicitly religious forms of socialism, of which liberation theology is a prime example.

Similarly, it is worth stressing that the main target of my critique is not the Latin American left's own orientation towards liberation theology. Rather, my main target is those Anglophone leftists who romanticize liberation theology to rationalize an explicitly or implicitly accommodationist stance towards religion. Since this standpoint rests on an idealization of liberation theology, it is worth spelling out what liberation theology is, why it is incompatible with Marxism, and why Marxist socialists should not use liberation theology to soften Marxism's traditionally anti-religious and pro-secular outlook.

Liberation theology, Marxism, and the critique of religion

As the name suggests, liberation theology is a theological approach that focuses on the liberation of oppressed groups. The term is most closely associated with the Roman Catholic political movements that emerged during the mid-to-late twentieth century, especially in the wake of the Second Vatican Council (1962-5), whose reforms shook up the Catholic Church. It is based on the notion that God has a "preferential option for the poor". In the late 1960s and early 1970s, the Dominican priest Gustavo Gutiérrez Merino, who thought Latin America's problems were rooted in an unjust social structure that was a manifestation of sin, articulated Catholic liberation theology as a theoretical principle. This culminated in *A Theology of Liberation* (1971). Liberation theology attempts to reconcile Catholicism and Marxism. This is a large part of why it is cited in favor of toning down the latter's militant secularism and atheism. Proponents of liberation theology frequently point to the line in the 1844 introduction to Marx's *Critique of the Philosophy of Right* that "[r]eligion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions". They read this line as sympathetic towards religion as a vehicle of protest in adverse circumstances.

This interpretation is poorly founded. Even in isolation, understanding religion as a response to conditions of suffering or oppression does not imply that one believes it to be a *good* response to those conditions. As for the rest of Marx's passage, while space constraints preclude me from quoting it in full, it is clearly, strongly critical of religion. Marx explicitly links the critique of religion to the critique of the real conditions that produce the felt need for religion as an illusory happiness. It is certainly true that Marx did not see religion as the root of humanity's alienation. Nevertheless, he saw religion as integral to humanity's alienation and thought it important to confront and undercut religious ideas and institutions. This forms part of his broader perspective that the world can be understood by human science and changed by human activity. Supernaturalism – including liberation theology – ultimately inhibits this vital element of human self-emancipation. This remains true even if socialists find religious beliefs helpful in the short term for articulating social grievances or mobilizing people to fight for political causes.

Liberation theology obscures Marx's idea of the working class moving humanity from the realm of necessity to the realm of freedom by its own hand. It fetishizes the poor as an object of mercy and

presents the socialist cause as a little more than a reworking of “the meek shall inherit the Earth”. Marx himself vigorously opposed this. As he and Engels put it in *The Communist Manifesto* (1848):

“Nothing is easier than to give Christian asceticism a Socialist tinge. Has not Christianity declaimed against private property, against marriage, against the State? Has it not preached in the place of these, charity and poverty, celibacy and mortification of the flesh, monastic life and Mother Church? Christian Socialism is but the holy water with which the priest consecrates the heart-burnings of the aristocrat.”

One might argue that these passages simply represent Marx and Engels at their most one-sidedly anti-religious. Indeed, Engels wrote extensively about historical religious movements in *The Peasant War in Germany* (1850) and *On the History of Early Christianity* (1894-5). He identified the religiously-infused peasant revolts of previous eras as a forerunner of sorts to modern revolutionary movements. This might shed light on Rosa Luxemburg’s later statement in *Socialism and the Churches* (1905) that “the Social-Democracy in no way fights against religious beliefs” themselves, but “from the moment when the priests use the pulpit as a means of political struggle against the working classes, the workers must fight against the enemies of their rights and their liberation”.

To be sure, Marx and Engels’ critique of religion was more nuanced than that of their former associates in the Young Hegelians. They paid greater attention to the historical conditions under which religion arises and prioritized organizing religious and non-religious workers alike to wage the class struggle. Nevertheless, both their early and later writings are replete with passages that confirm the importance of atheism and opposing religion. Three examples make this clear: In *On the Jewish Question* (1843), Marx writes that “[m]an emancipates himself *politically* from religion by banishing it from the sphere of public law to that of private law”. This indicates that he saw religion itself as something from which humanity needs to be emancipated and secularism as a key step towards that emancipation. In an 1846 circular for the Communist Correspondence Committee, Marx harshly criticizes the religious communism of Hermann Kriege, editor of the New York, German-language journal *Der Volks-Tribun*. In a November 1847 report to the London German Workers’ Educational Society, Marx states that “[o]f all that has been achieved by German philosophy the critique of religion is the most important thing”: the problem is that “[t]his critique…has not proceeded from social development” and “has limited itself to proving that [religion] rests on false principles.” Other examples abound, including a commentary on an 1855 anti-church movement demonstration in Hyde Park, where Marx remarks that “[i]t will be realized…that the struggle against clericalism assumes the same character in England as every other serious struggle there”, and the *Critique of the Gotha Programme* (1875), which argues that “the workers’ party ought…to have expressed its awareness of the fact that bourgeois ‘freedom of conscience’ is nothing but the toleration of all possible kinds of religious freedom of conscience and that for its part it endeavours rather to liberate the conscience from the witchery of religion”.

Lenin observes in *The Attitude of the Workers’ Party to Religion* (1909) that Marxism’s philosophical basis is “a materialism which is absolutely atheistic and positively hostile to all religion.” In a 1924 Pravda article on anti-religious propaganda, Trotsky states that “naked criticism” of religious beliefs can be ineffective or even counterproductive and yet socialists should continue to attack religion via “blockading, undermining, and encircling maneuvers.” In short, Marx and Engels, as well as later major figures in the revolutionary tradition, thought it insufficient merely to preach atheism and unavoidable for Marxists to act in common political cause with religious believers, but none of this negates their oppositional attitude towards religion itself.

As such, Marx and Engels would almost certainly agree with Hitchens’ remark that liberation theology is “a contradiction in terms”. The fact that many liberation theologists sincerely see themselves as “religious Marxists” no more proves a compatibility between Catholicism and

Marxism than the existence of people who sincerely believe in intelligent design proves a compatibility between creationism and evolution by natural selection. Indeed, I would go one step further and say that liberation theology is an ideological obstacle to perhaps the most radical, ethical project in Marx's writings. This project is the creation of a new morality that, to borrow Nietzsche's famous phrase, goes "beyond good and evil". Attempting to translate Marxism into Christian terms undermines the powerful idea that, as morality is historically variable and moral values are themselves capable of valuation, humanity's emancipation from religion in a new social formation can finally allow humanity to "author its own values".

Further problems with liberation theology

Of course, someone sympathetic to liberation theology might readily concede that it is philosophically incompatible with Marxism and yet argue that, since liberation theology has inspired and mobilized the downtrodden in Latin America, Marxists should relax their traditional commitment to militant secularism and radical atheism. I remain skeptical. To begin with, romanticizing liberation theology as an alternative to left-wing secular politics leads to an overestimation of its political influence. Despite his reputation as a proponent of liberation theology, Archbishop Óscar Romero of San Salvador, who was assassinated in 1980, never believed in liberation theology himself. As Jon Lee Anderson observes, there were far greater tensions between the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN) and the left-wing priests in El Salvador than the popular image of a "church-revolutionary synthesis" implied. The FMLN leadership and many rank-and-file *compas* would profess their atheism despite finding liberation theology a useful tool for organizing devout peasants.

In Nicaragua, where liberation theology had greater political significance, religious conservatism has grown in power. The Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) was in opposition between 1990 and 2007. During this period, Miguel d'Escoto Brockmann, a famous Sandinista priest and adherent of liberation theology, became an apologist for the party's abandonment of its historic platform to gain support from the center-right. Ultimately, Daniel Ortega, FSLN leader and current President of Nicaragua, allied with the Catholic Church and backed a 2006 abortion ban to help him win his presidency.

As for liberation theology's influence within the Catholic Church itself, in 1984 the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith issued an admonition on liberation theology and deemed it contrary to Catholic social teaching. Pope Francis is a member of the Jesuits, who were a major influence on liberation theology, and enjoys a reputation as "the progressive pope". However, his stance on LGBT rights is ultimately the same condescending "hate the sin and not the sinner" line we have long come to expect from the Vatican and he still says that abortion is always unacceptable. By themselves, liberation theology's heretical status and general failure to shift the Church's direction do not necessarily invalidate it. Nevertheless, they point to the broader problem with trying to advance the socialist cause by becoming the left wing of a fundamentally reactionary institution.

Still, a proponent of liberation theology might argue that it is a positive, revolutionary force, even if its relationship with the Latin American left is more complicated than the stereotype implies, because it led a great many Latin Americans towards a left-wing perspective and most liberation theologists did not follow d'Escoto's road towards apologism for authoritarianism. Additionally, those left-wing priests inspired by liberation theology tended to be more embedded in working-class communities than the Marxist "sects". In this respect, one might draw a limited comparison with how, in the Socialist Party USA, the Christian socialists were often to the left of the more orthodox Marxist Kautskyites, thereby undermining (or at least complicating) Marx's own view of Christianity as essentially reactionary.

There certainly have been eras in the histories of socialist movements when the Christian left has been more radical and more popular in the working-class than the secular Marxist left. However, this is not because Christian forms of socialism are more emancipatory in their substance. Rather, it is because religious socialists often begin from a more ingrained position within the working class in parts of the world where religion is still ideologically dominant and institutionally entrenched. Nevertheless, there have been times when the more militantly secular and atheistic left has developed a more substantial working-class base. This was true of, for example, the Bolsheviks during the Russian Revolution. It is one thing to accept that Marxists will have to work with religious socialists as part of the political class struggle; it is quite another for Marxists to treat the current popularity of religious socialism in a given part of the working class as an excuse to adopt a neutral attitude towards religion or to positively support the progressive wing of a religion against its reactionary wing. The latter is tantamount to giving up on the prospect of our own worldview becoming widespread among workers or to flat-out denying that there is any significant conflict between our own worldview and that of the religious left.

What we have to lose

This brings me to the overarching question of what we as the organized left lose when we play down the significance of atheism, secularism, and the critique of religion in the Marxist perspective. As I indicated previously, Marx's opposition to religious thinking stemmed directly from his view that the world is understandable through human science and changeable through human activity, which leaves no room for supernatural beliefs. This is not simply incidental to Marx's conception of freedom: it both reflects and strengthens the Promethean spirit that animates his entire philosophy.

Additionally, whilst secularism and atheism are separate commitments, there is more to secularism than demanding that religion and the state be kept separate. Taking secularism seriously should also be a question of how we conduct ourselves politically as socialists even when we are not in power. There is a world of difference between, on the one hand, socialists of different religious beliefs organizing together as a party or proto-party on a secular basis and making the case for socialism on grounds that one does not need to belong to any given religion to accept and, on the other hand, organizing on a specifically religious basis and letting the party's political program rest on specifically religious assumptions. Romanticizing liberation theology makes it all too easy to slip from the former to the latter. This is not simply a distant risk. Just this April, the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), the largest socialist organization in the US, held a conference with the explicit objective of "Building the Religious Left".

I return to the "postcolonial" or Third Worldist idealization of liberation theology that brought me to this topic in the first place. Characterizing secularism and atheism as "white European" values has more than a few uncomfortable echoes of the old, racist notion that those of us from what is now called the Global South are inherently spiritual and therefore incapable of adopting a rational, materialist perspective. In other words, there is a certain irony in how the sections of the left most anxious to avoid Orientalism end up painting a colonialist assumption in progressive colors.

To be clear, a workers' party should still allow religious people to join, provided they do not proselytize within it. Likewise, socialists should defend people's freedom of religion and as such oppose the oppression of religious groups. What we should not do is change our political program to suit people's religious beliefs, cease being sharp critics of religion, or downplay the significance of Marx and Engels' atheism within their broader theoretical perspective. We as socialists do ourselves no favors by treating religion less like an ideology or an institution that can be ruthlessly critiqued like any other and more like a quasi-natural part of one's very being.

In summary, liberation theology is ultimately incoherent and hazardous as a basis for left-wing

politics. Arguing that the left should ease its commitment to secularism and the critique of religion because we Latin Americans have high rates of religiosity infantilizes us by implying that we cannot withstand criticism or ridicule of our beliefs. Instead of assuming that we can never shed our supernaturalism and that liberation theology is therefore the best we can achieve, the left should take inspiration from the long, proud tradition of secular anti-colonialism in the Global South that sees questioning religion as an inexorable part of the liberation struggle. As the Indian communist revolutionary Bhagat Singh put it in his classic essay *Why I Am an Atheist* (1930): "Any man who stands for progress has to criticize, disbelieve and challenge every item of the old faith…mere faith and blind faith is dangerous: it dulls the brain and makes a man reactionary."