

MYTHS OF CHRISTIANITY: A SOCIOLOGICAL VIEW¹

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Thank you very much. I appreciate the invitation to come here this evening and share my thoughts and reactions to the issue of the ten myths about Christianity. I think you should know a bit of the context of my remarks. I am a sociologist and, as such, I have an interest in people's beliefs, especially with respect to the consequences of beliefs for action. My particular interest concerns the *this*-worldly aspects of religious phenomena.

Second, my interest in social ideologies has led me to study, in considerable depth, the secular ideology of Marxism. What strikes me, initially, are some of the similarities between ideological belief systems of a secular or religious character. I hope to point out some parallels and perhaps some common grounds. I should point out that my working document is the pamphlet "Ten Myths About Christianity."

On the issue of whether Christ was only a great moral teacher, I have to claim that the alternative, spiritual answer is outside the brackets of social science. I can certainly agree, however, that Jesus "could not be simply a *harmless* moral teacher" because, with the advantage of considerable hindsight, his teachings have had profound effects, and his followers have brought harm as well as benefits to humankind.

The second aspect of Christianity is of more importance to me. That is the injunction to make a "free and unselfish contribution to humanity" and, in the process, to combat selfishness and bigotry. Here I can see a clear parallel. Marxism has often seen organized religion as a considerable prop for oppressive regimes. But this view is one-sided and it is the social side of Christianity which interests me here—the practical intervention to end injustice and poverty in the world. In many places, committed Christians are in the lead in the battle against political oppression. Liberation theology comes immediately to mind. In Canada, the United Church is ahead of most other denominations in its support of liberal social causes.

Nevertheless, the text notes that many Christians, or people who profess Christianity, are bigoted and intolerant. The same phenomenon occurs in Marxism: there are those who hold what they regard as the principles of Marxism tenaciously, to the point of condemning all other socialists who do not adhere to specific, fairly detailed points of theory without any concern for the complexities of time and place.

There is another interesting parallel in the section on Christians being concerned both with this world and at the same time being "other-worldly." While, for Marxists, there is no belief in a perfect human world that existed in the past equivalent to the Garden of Eden, they do look toward the future with optimism for human potentiality, although it is a *this*-worldly potentiality. In the meantime, there is common cause in the fight for love, healing and justice, in the fight to oppose evil, violence, oppression and narcissism,

Third, adherence to any belief system, whether secular or religious, can be seen as a crutch or, perhaps more positively, as an expression of the need for emotional security. Without doubt, there is such a need in this vale of tears. I am sympathetic to the notion of "healing" as being analogous to treating the underlying disease rather than the symptoms, although we may disagree on the diagnosis and the cure.

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Furthermore, no adequate sociology can accept the deterministic position that beliefs of any kind are simply conditioned. The capacity for making choices is, without doubt, a key element in our own humanity. Nevertheless, sociology would be impossible without the existence of patterned behaviour. So, although the philosophical dilemma between free will and determinism has never been and can never be solved by sociology, what intrigues me is the orderliness of belief systems such that people who are socialized in a specific culture came to share its world view. I recognize the attraction of certain types of Eastern mysticism to some in the West, while wishing to study this attraction in a sociological way. Furthermore, I accept that the direction of ideological influence has been more often the reverse; that is, from west to east, not least of all reflected in the spread of Christianity. I suspect, however, that western technological development and military prowess add prestige to the export of ideologies such as Christianity, to which list Marxism could well be added.

The real test for the *adoption* of a belief system is in practice, as the text points out, but I am a bit disturbed by this passage. It is asserted that, for a Christian, a radical commitment is required, a radical turning from evil to good, a renunciation of falsehood and embracing of truth. For sociologists, the question of good and evil, truth and falsehood, are all very problematic, especially since the discipline takes a very relativistic position on these issues. Isn't this, at least in part, the root of the problem of bigotry, pointed out earlier?

More serious for me, though, is the assertion that, under this criteria of commitment through belief and action: "Many who call themselves Christians would be excluded." This smacks of one of the most destructive tendencies among Marxists. Sectarianism appears in dogmatic assertions about one group or person being more revolutionary or being the one true Marxist Party. This doctrinaire approach has been harmful. It reflects a political bigotry and intolerance and springs from ideological pettiness, selfishness and narcissism, character traits which are also discussed in the text on myths of Christianity.

Some of these differences in perspective relate directly to differing interpretations of basic texts. I am familiar enough with debates within Marxism concerning what Marx "really meant," with some of these arguments hinging on the translation from the German, to appreciate the varieties of interpretations which may be given to passages from even more ancient sources.

What I find striking about reading selection from ancient texts is how pervasive were the religious interpretation of daily events. The frequent intrusion of the supernatural in history seems to be much less common nowadays. Whether or not this is progress would seem to be a matter of opinion. I believe that it is.

Finally, I believe that the sharp distinction some would draw between science and religion cannot be maintained absolutely. Social science also rests on unprovable assumption about existence. It is a perspective, a chosen interpretation, a world view. But it has the advantage of potentially being proven false, at least, through the concrete analysis of experience. I am told by my more spiritual friends that it is a particularly poverty-stricken one, that it ignores a whole other reality. Well, I can only comment that such poverty will always be with us, and perhaps it will be the poor and not the meek who will inherit the earth.