

## **Religion, Idealism, Ideology, Revolution:**

### **Three radical-left views of the socio-political significance of Christianity**

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#### **Introduction**

Contrary to some predictions, it appears religion is coming back. We are constantly being reminded that religion is becoming more important again in late modernity. Despite this, religion is still “banished to the sidelines in the contemporary field of theoretical struggle” (Beckford 2003: 12). Moreover, when religion is studied, it is often a concept of ‘religion’ so reified and generalised as to be of questionable use (Beckford 2003: 15-16). Theorists will sometimes write on the specific type of religion they see, and assume it is true of ‘religion’ or ‘Christianity’ in general (McLellan 1987: 5-6); other times certain topics are highlighted at the expense of others. With regard to religion’s relation to the social order, the “legitimizing effects of religion” have been studied at length, while the emancipatory potential of religion is “almost always ignored” (Torres 1992: 105).

I will attempt to make some small effort towards remedying this in the few pages that follow, by looking at three broad ways of assessing the socio-political significance of the Christian tradition, from social theorists working within the ‘radical left’ tradition(s)<sup>1</sup>. These two streams of thought and action have often been at odds, but this was not always the case; the early French socialists saw socialism as a continuation of Christianity (McLellan 1987: 1). Marx brutally opposed this (McLellan 1987: 21), but there were various flirtations between Marxism and Christianity in the 20th century (McLellan 1987: 5). Something of the ambiguity of Marxist and other socialist thinkers’ stances towards religion will be present in the thinkers I will canvas.

Briefly, I will study the idea of Christianity as an idealist/spiritualist distraction from material struggles, for which I will draw on Mikhail Bakunin and Karl Marx, the notion of Christianity as an idealist/spiritualist language for the articulation of material struggles, for which I will look at Friedrich Engels and Louis Althusser, and the suggestion of Christianity as ideology critique and radical material utopia, for which I will discuss Slavoj Žižek and Jacques Ellul. The fact that all of these theorists are European males from the past 200 years is unfortunate; perhaps it can be somewhat excused by the fact that the ‘radical left’ tradition has been dominated by European males from the past 200 years.

#### *On ideology*

An important concept to all of the below theorists is *ideology*, though it is an ambiguous term so it is worth clarifying my definition from the start. The two main sets of definitions are both different from the original meaning as coined by French philosopher Destutt de Tracy, meaning a “science of ideas” (Thompson 1990: 29-30).

Definitions since then have roughly fallen into two categories; *critical* conceptions of ideology, which were pioneered by Napoleon but have been most commonly associated with the Marxist

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<sup>1</sup> Marxism, anarchism, communism, and generally all radical rejections of capitalism in favour of a more egalitarian and/or free alternative. Most of the theorists I will look at are either Marxist, or Marx has left some kind of mark on their theory.

tradition, and *neutral* conceptions of ideology, which are found in the vernacular and some theorists, including some Marxists such as Georg Lukács and Vladimir Lenin (Thompson 1990: 44-47). The main criticism that can be made of these neutral conceptions is that they deprive the concept of its critical edge which, although it is not original to the word, can be a very useful tool of analysis (Abercrombie, Hill & Turner 1983: 158).

As there are other phrases for ideology as ‘idea-system’ (worldview, beliefs, discourse, culture etc.), and as I want to make use of this ‘critical edge’, I favour a critical definition. Within ‘critical definitions’ it is necessary to specify further; Marx himself used several different conceptions of ideology. Napoleon’s (and Marx’s first) conception of ideology essentially equalled what I will call ‘idealism’ below (Thompson 1990: 34-37). Marx’s next use of the term was as “a system of ideas which expresses the interests of the dominant class but which represents class relations in an illusory form”<sup>2</sup> (Thompson 1990: 37-40). This is not quite appropriate here, considering that it contradicts Marx’s own concept of ideological religion outlined below. Thompson identifies a third, “latent” conception of ideology in Marx, which he did not actually use the word ideology for, representing a “system of representations which serves to sustain existing relations of class domination”<sup>3</sup> (1990: 40-44).

I sympathise with Thompson in wanting to explore this ‘latent conception’, narrowing its criteria in order to expand its scope; focusing not on abstraction, falsehood or the expression of dominant interests, but purely on how a communication functions to “establish and sustain relations of domination”<sup>4</sup> (1990: 54-58). Thompson, however, restricts his definition of ideology to “symbolic forms” or “meaning”; he excludes other ways in which domination is supported, such as “apathy and indifference ... habit and routine” (1990: 56). I would like to draw from Althusser’s focus on the materialisation of ideology in rituals and habits, as well as Žižek’s sense of the ideological nature of apathy and cynicism; particularly because I am studying these theorists below.

So the definition I will be working with is Žižek’s rather broad conception; whereby ideology is any content (true or false; doctrine, ritual or belief; etc) that is “functional with regard to some relation of social domination ... in an inherently non-transparent way” (Žižek 1994: 8). In many ways, this definition relates more to external action than internal belief; the specific (and contextual) way the belief, communication or activity functions with regard to relations of domination is what determines it as ideological or not.

### **Bakunin (and Marx) – Christianity as an idealist/spiritualist distraction from material struggles**

Although Karl Marx made the most famous ‘radical left’ comment on religion, the notion of the ‘opium of the people’, Marx referred to religion only in passing (McLellan 1987: 31). It is often said that Engels better fleshed out a ‘Marxist theory of religion’ (Turner 1991: 65,71). As we will see, Engels did write far more about religion than Marx, but his focus was usually different from the Marxist view represented in the tantalisingly brief ‘opium’ statement. This view is better developed by the Russian anarchist Mikhail Bakunin, Marx’s anarchist rival in the incipient socialist

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<sup>2</sup> Emphasis removed. All emphasis is unchanged unless otherwise noted.

<sup>3</sup> Emphasis removed.

<sup>4</sup> Emphasis removed.

movement of the nineteenth century, in his half-finished polemic *God and the State* (Bakunin 1882)<sup>5</sup>.

This theory states categorically that religion, particularly Christianity, is ideological (according to the above definition). Many diverse theorists of religion, including Émile Durkheim and Max Weber, share the view that religion plays a role in “the reproduction of the social order” (Torres 1992: 61). While Durkheim’s description of religion as ‘collective consciousness’ is a broad description of the effects of religion-in-general on societies-in-general (Torres 1992: 15-26), Weber seeks to articulate a specific relationship between certain theological beliefs and certain social-economic activity. Jacques Ellul observes that over its history Christianity has functioned ideologically in both ways; as a “civic religion” aimed at “gathering and unifying”, and as a “religion of escape” with ideological properties linked to specific theological beliefs (Ellul 1986: 28-29,39-40), so a criticism of Christianity as ideological could follow either of these routes. While Antonio Gramsci seems to take the route of a ‘critical Durkheim’, affirming that the role of religion is cementing and unifying (Therborn 1984: 172), Marx and Bakunin are more akin to Weber here, articulating specific aspects of Christian belief that have an ‘elective affinity’ with the ‘opium’ effect.

Bakunin’s attack on religion is motivated by a sense of duty to “recover from heaven the goods which it has stolen and return them to earth” (Bakunin 1882: 36). His critique forms the centre of his advocacy of materialism against idealism<sup>6</sup>. He also despises Deists, Romantics and other idealists<sup>7</sup>, but he considers Christianity the apotheosis of the idealism he detests. Marxism has similarly tended to put religion at the very top of the superstructure – furthest from material reality (McLellan 1987: 2).

Bakunin believes that idealism “starts from divinity to establish slavery and condemn the masses to an endless animality” (1882: 48). In his view, the concept of God necessarily lowers our view of humanity and the material world, because “God being everything, the real world and man are nothing” (1882: 24). If God exists, he is necessarily a tyrant, and the human is necessarily a slave (1882: 27). The hierarchy of God and man is inevitably reflected in earthly hierarchy; and our servile position beneath God encourages ignorance and obedience. Thus, in a reversal of Voltaire’s phrase, Bakunin states that “*if God really existed, it would be necessary to abolish him*” (1882: 28). Meanwhile, Bakunin credits Satan with representing the reverse tendencies; reason and rebellion; which he sees as humanity’s two greatest strengths and defining traits (1882: 9-10).

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<sup>5</sup> In fact, the view in question predates both Marx and Bakunin; it is part of the classic materialist critique of religion found in French materialism and the pre-Hegel German enlightenment. Bakunin represents one of the most extensive and impassioned articulations of this criticism, while Marx’s innovation was to reinforce the criticism with the strong affirmation that the ‘opium’ effects are not merely the ‘unintended consequences’ of the theology, but result from the active use of religion as an ideology (Torres 1992: 3).

<sup>6</sup> Bakunin’s intended title for the book, *The Historical Sophisms of the Doctrinaire School of Communism*, indicates this broader focus on idealism in general. The terms ‘materialism’ and ‘idealism’ are of course to be taken in the ontological sense, rather than the popular meanings that were common even in the nineteenth century. Engels ridicules these definitions, which he attributes to defamation of materialism by priests; “By the word materialism, the philistine understands gluttony, drunkenness, lust of the eye, lust of the flesh, arrogance, cupidity, avarice, covetousness, profit-hunting, and stock-exchange swindling – in short, all the filthy vices in which he himself indulges in private. By the word idealism he understands the belief in virtue, universal philanthropy, and in a general way a “better world”, of which he boasts before others but in which he himself at the utmost believes only so long as he is having the blues or is going through the bankruptcy consequent upon his customary “materialist” excesses” (Engels 1986: 237).

<sup>7</sup> Particularly Jean-Jacques Rousseau, whom he calls “the real creator of modern reaction” (Bakunin 1882: 79-80).

While all religions rest on this “perpetual immolation of humanity to the insatiable vengeance of divinity”, Christianity, and particularly Catholicism, have most effectively universalised it (1882: 24-26). Marx also identifies religion as “the illusory sun which revolves round man as long as he does not revolve around himself” (Marx 1844: 50). Christianity can also produce a conception of the human being as an abstracted individual, which Marx identifies especially with Christianity’s “bourgeois developments, Protestantism, Deism, &c.” (Marx 1867: 135). This abstract individualism serves as the perfect anthropological accompaniment to capitalism<sup>8</sup>.

Likewise, if the ideal or spiritual are everything, the material is necessarily nothing. The idealist mindset is offended to hear that humanity is “only a product of *vile matter*” (Bakunin 1882: 12). Looking upon reality from a theorised “point of view of eternity or of the abstract idea”, the idealist is necessarily led to “treat passing matters with disdain”; which encompasses the entirety of material reality (1882: 53). The effect of this disavowal of the material world is to downplay the importance of material suffering, as any earthly vicissitudes are of no import in the context of the infinitely superior ideal or spiritual reality; thus, any and all earthly oppressions are justified. To the extent that oppressed people still dream of escape from their earthly bonds, Christianity serves as a “safety-valve” (1882: 17), displacing all hopes for salvation into a separate ‘spiritual’ realm to be accessed after death. Bakunin mentions three possible escapes from suffering; the first two, “the dram-shop and the church, debauchery of the body or debauchery of the mind”, are illusory; only the third, social revolution, is a genuine remedy to material suffering (1882: 17).

Thus despite its false basis and its pernicious effects, Bakunin is willing to concede that religion is at its root a reaction against oppression; an instinctual protest against “the narrowness, the platitudes, the sorrows, and the shame of a wretched existence” (1882: 23). This is the meaning of Marx’s famous statement; “religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, just as it is the spirit of a spiritless world. It is the *opium* of the people” (Marx 1844: 42). Religion is at its root a protest; but it functions as a painkiller rather than a real cure; it offers consolation in the shape of a promised world of justice elsewhere, rather than transformation and justice here and now (McLellan 1987: 23). This problematises another famous Marxist statement, “the ruling ideas of each age have ever been the ideas of its ruling class” (Marx & Engels 1848: 88). In the case of Christianity as opium, the ideas of the dominated classes are in fact their own ideas; but Christianity’s ideological function is to neuter this dissenting class consciousness from having any material effect on the status quo.

This is a potent critique of any religion or worldview that downplays the importance of the material world. However, this anti-materialism is more characteristic of Greek thought, particularly Platonism, than biblical Christianity. Greek philosophy, in all its diversity, is characterised by dichotomies of “primary reality” and “everyday reality” (Strom 2000: 36,68). Plato’s articulation of this involved an ontology whereby “the world of space, time and matter is of secondary ontological importance, and the unseen world of Forms, or Ideas, is primary”; temporal reality is fleeting and ultimately unreal (Wright 2003: 49). This dualism and idealism was closely linked to social hierarchy just as Bakunin describes, as “abstraction, idealism and elitism” went hand in hand; the various Hellenistic philosophies produced by various Hellenistic elites legitimised and perpetuated

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<sup>8</sup> Bakunin does not mention this observation of Marx’s. Though he supports individualism in the sense of valuing the human individual (1882: 58), he loathes abstraction, speaking of abstractions as “the vampires of history, ever nourished upon human blood” (1882: 53-60, so he would likely be sympathetic to Marx’s opposition to abstract individualism.

deeply hierarchical societies (Strom 2000: 13,58-69).

The earliest expressions of Christianity challenged these tendencies at both a practical and philosophical level (Strom 2000: 121-125). Most obviously, the concept of God becoming human and uniquely valuing the human individual, particularly the poor and marginalised, is the direct reverse both of Greek elitism and of Bakunin's caricatures about how if God exists, humanity is nothing. But in a more general sense, the Christian ontology cuts diagonally across Bakunin and Marx's opposition between idealism and materialism; denying both the Platonist view of materiality as an imaginary reflection of eternal Ideas, and its mirror image, the one-sided materialism that posits ideas and spirituality as a chimerical reflection of the material world (Wink 1984: 5). In the more integral Christian ontology, springing from Semitic thought rather than the dualism of Indo-European worldviews, matter and spirit are "united in one indivisible reality, distinguishable in two discrete but interrelated manifestations"; the outer and the inner (1984: 107). These 'manifestations', really two perspectives on a single reality, "come into existence together and cease to exist together. Neither is the cause of the other" (1984: 124).

This renders more meaningful the frequent biblical invectives against material injustice, as the solution is placed firmly in this world. The original Christian eschatology promised not escape into a sequestered spiritual realm, as with Greek or Eastern religion, but "a transformed reality that involves both a new heaven (spirituality) and a new earth (materiality)" (Wink 1984: 124-125, Revelation 21:1-5<sup>9</sup>). This Jewish 'transformed reality', known as the Kingdom (or Reign) of God, is a utopian description of equality, freedom and peace in this world, and the novel message of Jesus is that this long-hoped-for redemption could be enacted now (Hauerwas 1983: 128-129). This utopia is a radical challenge to prevailing power distributions and ideologies, promising destruction of "every ruler and every authority and power" (1 Corinthians 15:24). Indeed, in stark contrast to Bakunin's view of God and Satan, in the New Testament Jesus represents the anarchist-king, refusing political and economic power and ultimately killed by the ruling authorities, while Satan represents the "god of this world" (2 Corinthians 4:4) who offers Jesus "all the kingdoms of the world" if only he will obey him (Matthew 4:1-11).

Of course, it must be said that Bakunin and Marx represent a valid and vital critique of the 'Really Existing Christianity' they observed in Russia and Germany (McLellan 1987: 5-6). Ellul notes that despite its radical origins, Christianity has indeed become a "flight from political or concrete reality" and therefore "a religion of conformity, of integration into the social body" (Ellul 1986: 133-134). In Ellul's admission, the established church by and large deserves the designation as the "opium of the people" (1986: 29). The dualist idealism may be Greek at root, but Bakunin is well aware of this, noting that it was absorbed into Christianity around the fourth century C.E. via neo-Platonist theologians, and has remained a dominant strand ever since (Bakunin 1882: 70-77).

This careful observation of the developments in Christian belief, and importance granted to theological change, is the main difference between Bakunin and Marx here. Marx emphasises the material determination of ideas; the "religious world is but the reflex of the real world" (1867: 135). Bakunin, meanwhile, takes ideas very seriously as a force capable of determining the material world for better or worse; in this sense he is more akin to Weber than Marx<sup>10</sup>. Göran Therborn says that a

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<sup>9</sup> All biblical references are taken or paraphrased from the *New Revised Standard Version*.

<sup>10</sup> David McLellan observes that the anarchist tradition has typically taken religion much more seriously as a "partially

central proposition of historical materialism is that “ideological change, and the generation of ideologies, is always dependent on non-ideological, material change” (Therborn 1980: 41). Historical idealism, on the other hand, is characterised by what he calls a “Münchhausen effect” – “the capacity of human beings to pull themselves up by their ideological bootstraps” and a sense that ideas can shape history from outside it (1980: 44). According to these definitions, Bakunin is an historical idealist, despite how staunch an ontological materialist he is.

### **Engels (and Althusser) – Christianity as an idealist/spiritualist language for the articulation of material struggles**

Friedrich Engels revisits the idea that Christianity expresses a protest against material injustice, but in his account this protest is not always successfully displaced. Although the class interests represented in religion are communicated in an alienated spiritual language, this language can nonetheless inspire effective – even revolutionary – action on the material plane. This opens up the possibility of Christianity functioning counter-ideologically under the right material-historical circumstances; Engels saw “the relationship of religion to revolution as a highly variable one” (McLellan 1987: 49).

Engels is firmly on Marx’s side on the question of material determination of ideas and ideologies, echoing Marx in saying that religion is “nothing but the fantastic reflection in men’s minds of those external forces which control their daily life” (Engels 1878: 147). Engels was interested in the conflict surrounding the Reformation in his native Germany, which was ostensibly based solely on ideas<sup>11</sup>. In Engels’ account, this supposed “violent theological bickering” was in fact motivated primarily by material class interests, “attempts of the burghers and plebeians ... and the peasants ... to adapt the old theological world outlook to the changed economic conditions” (Engels 1850: 97-98, 1887: 270).

The reason these material struggles were expressed “under religious shibboleths” (1850: 98) was that the church held hegemony over all intellectual production; politics, jurisprudence and all sciences were “mere branches of theology”, and the clergy were the only educated class (1850: 98, 1887: 269). In these conditions, the discourse of theological heresies and religious prophecy was “the only language [the people] could then understand” (1850: 117). Thus the Reformation divided Germany along class lines; reactionary Catholics, bourgeois Lutherans, and revolutionaries (1850: 97). The inevitable rise of the bourgeoisie produced the victory of the Lutheran church, whose theology best represented bourgeois interests.

Ultimately, theology was still an alienated, false language, and it was for the better of the bourgeoisie (and for historical progress) when, after another movement of theological bourgeois revolution in 17<sup>th</sup>-century England, the bourgeoisie of France were able to “entirely cast off the religious cloak” and revolt on “undisguised political lines” in the French Revolution (Engels 1887: 270, 1892: 305). This was the most successful bourgeois uprising to date, and led to their complete triumph, and the destruction of the aristocracy.

However, Engels was less interested in the victories of the bourgeois Protestants, and more

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independent variable” than Marxism (McLellan 1993: 9).

<sup>11</sup> From the thirteenth to the seventeenth centuries (1887: 270).

interested in the attempted rebellions of the peasants and plebeians; particularly the Anabaptist Thomas Münzer, who, unlike the bourgeois reactionary Luther, was genuinely revolutionary (1850: 108-111). The theology that best expressed the interests of the landless plebeians and peasants was Anabaptism, which found the “chiliastic dream-visions” of early Christianity a “convenient starting-point” (1850: 102). The Anabaptist sects resurrected the imminent, this-worldly utopia of the kingdom of God, which in practice meant the abolition of class difference, private property, usury, and state authority, and the establishment of total equality (1850: 111). They rallied around Münzer in the popular revolt known as the Peasants’ War.

However, the peasants and plebeians were ultimately doomed to failure, due to the “limits set by the contemporary situation” (1850: 102-103); that is to say, the predetermined material history was decreeing the rise of the bourgeoisie at that time, not the peasantry. In practice, the radical demands of the Anabaptists were watered down – common ownership to charity, Christian equality to civic equality, anarchism to democracy; the “anticipation of communism by fantasy became in reality an anticipation of modern bourgeois conditions” (1850: 102-103). Although the Anabaptists’ conduct was counter-ideological to the extreme, the ultimate effects of all the Reformation-era struggles were ideological in support of the class emerging into hegemony, if not the established class at the time<sup>12</sup>.

Engels’ account still remains bound to the Platonist understanding of Christianity (and the ‘reversed Platonist’ one-sided materialism). He is as strongly opposed to the prioritising of the spiritual over the material as Bakunin and Marx, but unlike Bakunin he doesn’t seem to realise the Greek sources of this dualism. In fact, he praises the Greek ontology and view of history in the same article as he falsely diagnoses “the senseless and antinatural idea of a contradiction between mind and matter, man and nature, soul and body” as arising “in Europe after the decline of classic antiquity” and finding “its highest elaboration in Christianity” (Engels 1883a: 188).

This dualist understanding of religion, where you have to choose either the material or the spiritual, leads Engels to downplay the genuine spiritual motivations of Münzer, who may have had a view more akin to the integral Christian ontology described by Wink. He talks of the “mask” or “screen” of religion, or of Anabaptist theology as a “convenient starting-point” for the revolutionaries (1850: 98,102, 1895: 317-318). Marx and Engels often saw religion as being used in a “mechanistic and instrumental fashion”; whether consciously using it to “mystify and control the peasants ... and the workers”, or to liberate them (Turner 1991: 77). Engels’ dualism means that he tends not to regard Christian movements as genuinely Christian if they are motivated by material interests, even though elsewhere he observes that the earliest Christianity was a movement of the oppressed seeking salvation from worldly suffering (Engels 1895: 316).

Karl Mannheim, by contrast, agrees that a simple idealist explanation for the Anabaptists’ revolts is grossly inadequate, but rather than a simple materialistic explanation, he asserts that the movement was “at the same time robustly material and highly spiritual” (Mannheim 1936 : 192). His description of the Chiliasts’ worldview calls to mind Wink’s description of genuine Christian ontology; “sensual experience ... is as inseparable from the spirituality in him as he is from his immediate present” (1936: 194). Richard Horsley has described other examples of religious

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<sup>12</sup> Ellul observes how the church tends to support “the political power that is *either* in place *or* in the course of being installed” (1986: 125, emphasis added).

revolutionary activity<sup>13</sup> which are profoundly religious and profoundly political-economic at the same time (Horsley 2003: 128).

In any case, Engels' description of the Peasant War provides an example of the ambiguous success of ideological instruments such as religion, when even the dominant one can become a site of resistance. This seems to indicate that discursive hegemony does not necessarily guarantee social dominance; which could problematise Foucauldian notions of the interrelation of knowledge and power. Engels' account opens up the possibility of religion being put to counter-ideological uses – at least in situations where theology is a dominant language. His description does not cover the possibility of revolutionary action by minority religious groups, or religious revolution in a secularised society.

Engels' account can be aided by French philosopher Louis Althusser's notion of the church as an 'ideological state apparatus'. Althusser sees his role as systematising what has lain latent in the classical Marxist tradition (Althusser 1970: 110,120). The Marxist view of society has traditionally consisted of an 'infrastructure,' an economic base comprised of the relations of production, and a 'superstructure', which is itself divided into the state apparatus and the various manifestations of ideology. The superstructure is determined "in the last instance" by the base, and primarily functions to reproduce the conditions of production (1970: 100,105). The 'state apparatus', consisting of laws, police, courts, prisons, army, government and administration, is a "machine" of repression whose primary function is to enable the ruling class(es) to "ensure their domination over the working class", and in the case of a capitalist mode of production, subject them to capitalist exploitation (1970: 106). All of this is standard Marxist theory which Althusser affirms.

His terminological innovation is to combine all the structural aspects of the superstructure under the banner of 'state apparatuses'. What Marxism has traditionally called the 'state apparatus' he terms the 'repressive state apparatus' (RSA), while what Gramsci called 'hegemonic apparatuses' (Eagleton 1991: 197) Althusser terms the 'ideological state apparatuses' (ISA). The latter include religious ISA (churches), educational ISA (schools), family ISA, legal ISA, political ISA (political systems and parties), trade-union ISA, communications ISA (media) and cultural ISA (arts and recreation) (Althusser 1970: 110-111).

The focus on the apparatuses in which ideology is materialised communicates the idea inherited from Gramsci that ideology is "largely unconscious and always institutional" (Eagleton 1991: 197). The classification of these institutions as 'state apparatuses' emphasises the functional commonality of the SAs despite formal differences. The (singular) RSA, which functions predominantly by violence and repression (secondly by ideology), is a public domain, "formally very similar" since ancient times (1970: 115), while the (plural and distinct) ISAs, which function primarily by ideology (secondly by repression), are mostly private domains and can be very diverse (1970: 111-114). Yet even the private ISAs deserve the designation of 'state' apparatuses because "what matters is how they function" (1970: 111). The ISAs, united beneath the ruling ideology, function similarly to the state apparatus proper, which gives the various SAs a "(sometimes teeth-gritting) 'harmony'" (1970: 112,115)<sup>14</sup>.

<sup>13</sup> Namely; the 1979 Iranian revolution, and ancient Judean movements including Christianity.

<sup>14</sup> Indeed, according to Althusser it is the ISAs which "largely secure the reproduction ... of the relations of production," more than the RSA which instead provides a "shield" securing the "political conditions" necessary for the ISAs to function ideologically (1970: 114). Again this calls to mind Gramsci who argued that all societies rule by both

Althusser's direct discussion of Christianity is mainly critical; usually drawing attention to the way it functions ideologically<sup>15</sup>. However, the ISAs are not a one-way street; they function as sites of contestation where the dominant ideology and counter-ideologies struggle for supremacy<sup>16</sup>. Althusser notes that while the superstructural features are determined 'in the last instance', the Marxist tradition has observed that they enjoy a "relative autonomy" from the base, and even a "reciprocal action" upon it (1970: 105). This opens up a theoretical space for the phenomenon of materially effective resistance taking place through the ideological apparatuses. Unlike Engels' accounts, Althusser's theory-dense article does not provide much in the way of direct descriptions of this resistance. Althusser does refer to the rare and heroic teachers who "turn the few weapons they find in the history and learning they 'teach' against the ideology, the systems and the practices in which they are trapped" (1970: 119). He does not give any examples of Christian resistance to hegemony, aside from briefly mentioning, à la Engels, that "all ideological struggle, from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century ... was *concentrated* in an anti-clerical and anti-religious struggle"<sup>17</sup> (1970: 115-116).

However, his theoretical explanation of how and why this can occur is more nuanced than Engels'. In Althusserian terms, Engels simply designates Christianity as the one hegemonic ISA throughout medieval times until the French Revolution (Engels 1892: 305). While endorsing much of this, Althusser describes an assortment of ISAs whose importance fluctuates with historical conditions. He also doesn't endorse Engels' somewhat naïve notion that, with the advent of secularism, struggles can now be expressed directly and without ideology. For Althusser, although the French Revolution was indeed an attack on that day's foremost ISA, the Catholic Church, the bourgeoisie "wrest[ed] its ideological functions away from it" rather than destroying them (Althusser 1970: 115-116).

Althusser says that the dominant ISA is now the school, which has taken over many of the ideological functions that the church monopolised in medieval times (1970: 115-120). As well as learning "know-how" for the jobs required by capitalism, schools disseminate "rules of morality, civic and professional conscience ... ultimately the rules of the order established by class domination" (1970: 103). Bakunin had also predicted that the school would come to take the place of the church, and serve many of the same ideological functions (Bakunin 1882: 38). Althusser denies the common ideological notion that the closest ideological ally of capitalism is the political ISA of democratic systems, noting that capitalism is able to make use of various political superstructures (1970: 116-117)<sup>18</sup>.

Althusser's account has a less reductive and deterministic feel than Engels. He does not simply reduce religious commitment to an unconscious (or even conscious) use of religious language to consent and coercion, but in capitalist societies the "ratio between consent and coercion shifts decisively towards the former" (Eagleton 1991: 198).

<sup>15</sup> He explains this in different ways to Bakunin and Marx, however; talking of how God is the [capital S] Subject who 'subjects' us all, in both senses of the word (117-118, 132-138).

<sup>16</sup> Althusser utilises a general definition of the word 'ideology', which he distinguishes from the concept of 'dominant ideology' (Pêcheux 1994: 145-147). This means that in Althusserian terms, the dominant ideology struggles with other ideologies in the ISA. In our terms, not everything that is expressed in the ideological state apparatuses is ideological; at times they can also be a site of resistance.

<sup>17</sup> Note *anti*-religious rather than religious.

<sup>18</sup> In this he is prophetic of twenty-first century China, which is doing capitalism 'better' than the West precisely *because* it spurns liberal-democratic politics and freedoms (Žižek 2008a:189).

express class antagonisms. He also does more justice to the notion that ideas and ideologies enjoy a 'relative autonomy'; a concept which even Engels concedes (1890: 283), but has not been stressed within Marxism until relatively recently (Abercrombie, Hill & Turner 1983: 152). Althusser's account also seems to be reconcilable to other ontologies than Bakunin, Marx and Engels' dualist materialism. Althusser emphasises that ideology has a material existence rather than an ideal or spiritual one (1970: 125) ideas 'as such' do not exist (1970: 128). He is even resolutely materialist enough to invert the usual assumption that action follows belief; drawing inspiration from Blaise Pascal's advice to "kneel down, move your lips in prayer, and you will believe" (1970: 127) to assert that ideas are derived from material actions performed within material ideological apparatuses. At the same time, however, all action without exception is performed "by and in an ideology" (1970: 128); ideology (in his wider definition) is eternal and universal. It is the very process of creating human subjects, in both senses of the word (1970: 128ff), and we would not be free of ideology even in a classless society (Eagleton 1991: 219). This seems like it could be reconciled with an ontology in which the material and ideal (and even spiritual) are integrated into one reality.

Another improvement of Althusser's account over Engels' is that it can explain religious resistance in situations where theology is *not* the dominant language, such as now, when Christianity is relatively marginalised and religion is no longer a dominant ISA. Of course, he does not spell out this out with relation to religion; he seems to reflect the same tendency as Bakunin, Marx and Engels (but not Gramsci) whereby the abstractions of science, art, education, philosophy can be either revolutionary or ideological, but religion is always in some sense harmful as it is a illusory abstraction (Bakunin 1882: 60, Marx 1867: 136, McLellan 1897: 30-31,54, Pozzolini 1970: 127).

However, now that Christianity has had its ideological functions taken away from it, perhaps it is in a better position for ideology critique and genuinely revolutionary action than other more dominant (and therefore more compromised) ISAs such as education, democracy, science<sup>19</sup>, media and family. Throughout history, Christianity seems to have been the most subversive when it has been marginalised, particularly in the early church prior to the conversion of Constantine<sup>20</sup>. While 'radical left' thought has tended to see resistance through Christianity as a rare and welcome corruption of its usual ideological function, it is more historically accurate to say that when Christianity became the dominant ISA, this was a corruption of its original radicality (Ellul 1986:

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<sup>19</sup> Žižek, with reference to John Gray, observes how science has taken over the ideological need for certainly once fed by the church. Ironically, this means that the churches have become "sanctuaries for doubt" and potentially "sites of resistance" (Žižek 2008b: 82).

<sup>20</sup> Engels displays an interesting schizophrenia when he discusses early Christianity. At times he compares the early church to the modern socialist movement, calling it a "great revolutionary movement" and saying that early Christian communities were not the equivalent of modern churches, but more akin to outposts of the International Working Men's Association (1883b: 205-208); at times he suggests that genuinely revolutionary politics did not enter Christianity until around the thirteenth century (1878: 145,149-150, 1886: 240); and at times he even repeats the Marx/Bakunin accusation of the early Christians seeking a "spiritual salvation" in place of material alleviation (1882: 202). In 1895 he seems to synthesise all these views by saying that Christianity did indeed have much in common with the modern socialist movement; both preach salvation to oppressed people, but "Christianity places this salvation in a life beyond, after death, in heaven; socialism places it in this world, in a transformation of society" (1895: 316). The reason the early church was unable to have a material revolutionary effect is attributed to "the historic conditions"; early Christianity was socialism "as far as it was possible at the time" (1895: 317). This vague reference to 'historic conditions' is a clue to why Engels cannot admit that early Christianity was genuinely revolutionary; it does not fit the official, predetermined Marxist schema of history, in which socialism does not arrive until much later, and certainly does not falter and fade away once it has arrived.

133-134)<sup>21</sup>. It is also worth noting that, although Engels makes much of the fact that Christian theology was the hegemonic discourse in the Middle Ages, the Anabaptists he studies are nonetheless a *minority, marginal* Christian sect, who were therefore able to “read the Gospel with non-Constantinian eyes” (Hauerwas 1988: 443). The suggestion that Christianity has more chance of being genuinely revolutionary when it is marginalised would fit better with the Marxist ideas of the proletariat (“a class with *radical chains*” – Marx 1844: 56) as the vehicle of revolutionary change.

### **Žižek (and Ellul) – Christianity as ideology critique and radical material utopia**

Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek represents one attempt to describe the potentially revolutionary nature of Christianity in the current global situation. This would seem to have a lot in common with Engels, as both are Marxist theorists describing versions of Christian revolution; but as we will see, his view is actually more like Bakunin’s. Žižek notes that modernity is characterised by the separation of religion from social-cultural orders, which means that it can no longer fulfil the traditional (Durkheimian) function of “the organic binding force of social substance”, but this also gives it more autonomy to potentially be a dissenting voice (Žižek 2003: 4-5). There are essentially two modes left to religion in modern times; “*therapeutic*”; helping individual religious consumers become better-adjusted to the current order, or “*critical*”; “a space for the voices of discontent” and a genuinely subversive force (Žižek 2003: 3).

With regard to ‘therapeutic’ religion, Žižek takes up the Bakunin/Marx criticism, even using the phrase ‘opium of the people’, but he applies it not to Christianity, but to fashionable New Age and Eastern spiritualities. These spiritualities present themselves as the solution to the frantic pace of the capitalist world, allowing the participant to retreat to an ‘inner world’ of meditation and spirituality. However, in Žižek’s account, this stance is the “perfect ideological supplement” to today’s capitalism, as it is the most effective way to deal with the stresses of the capitalist system, and *continue to fully engage in it*, all the while assuring oneself that the outer engagement is a mere game (Žižek 2001: 12-15). This leads to the same uncritical engagement with the material world as Platonised Christianity. Of course, Marx and Bakunin were focusing on the oppressed masses, while Žižek seems to be focusing largely on upper/middle classes and business elites; he notes the growth of a “corporate Zen” culture among business managers (Žižek 2009c: 131-132). Perhaps his observations of the increasingly hegemonic role of New Age philosophies have more in common with Weber’s account of Calvinism and the ascending bourgeoisie; indeed, Žižek suggests that “if Max Weber were alive today, he would definitely write a second, supplementary, volume to his *Protestant Ethic*, entitled *The Taoist Ethic and the Spirit of Global Capitalism*” (Žižek 2001: 13).

Žižek insists, however, that Christianity can present a materialist challenge to the capitalist order, and the idealist “new spiritualisms” that support it (Žižek 2000: 1). Indeed, he even suggests that in order to be a genuine materialist today, we need to undergo “the Christian experience” (Žižek 2003:

<sup>21</sup> It is illuminating to compare Bakunin’s critique of established Christianity with that of his contemporary Leo Tolstoy. They lamented many of the same doctrines that were being transmitted through Russian schools at the time; eternal damnation, penal substitutionary atonement and above all the divine right of kings (Bakunin 1882: 111, Tolstoy 1894). The difference is that Tolstoy, as a Christian anarchist, saw these doctrines and the institutional church as a perversion of Christ’s true teaching, rather than as evidence of the intrinsic perversity of the Christian message. Bakunin is well aware of how power corrupts intellectual traditions, predicting that after gaining power, science and education would become the ideological institutions that Žižek and Althusser later observed (Bakunin 31-39,55-63). In the radical Christian account, this is what has happened to Christianity.

6); a rather remarkable claim for an atheist to make. Žižek does not acknowledge the existence of any God or ““higher,” suprasensible reality” (Žižek 2009b: 240), nor does he affirm the literal bodily resurrection of Jesus. Nonetheless, he believes that the experience of solidarity with the story of Jesus’ death and resurrection is vital for creating a truly materialist stance in all its psychological and political implications (Žižek 2009b: 287-288). He thus sums himself up as a “Paulinean materialist” (Žižek 1999: ix).

Žižek reads the Christ-event through Hegelian dialectics (Žižek 2009a), in which the three persons of the Trinity do not exist eternally and harmoniously, but are three separate and sequential substantiations of God (Žižek 2009b: 291). The birth of Jesus is the death of the Father, and the birth of the Holy Spirit is the death of Jesus. This can essentially be broken down into two gestures, which are in fact two perspectives on the same Event according to Žižek; the death of the big Other, and the birth of the Holy Spirit.

The ‘big Other’ is a Lacanian term for “the symbolic Order” which “guarantees the meaningfulness of our acts” (Žižek 2001: 109-110, Žižek 2009b: 296). It is Žižek’s contention that a genuine atheist stance requires us to “accept that the big Other doesn’t exist, and act upon it” (Žižek 2009b: 299), and that Christianity, in depicting the death of God, is the only philosophy that “opens up the space for thinking this nonexistence” (Žižek 2009b: 287). The gesture of killing the big Other begins with the Incarnation, where God abandons his transcendent position as a “hidden Master pulling the strings” in order to embody himself in an “accidental individual” (Žižek 2009a: 81). This gesture of self-abandonment reaches its climax when this accidental individual, Christ, dies. Jesus’ cry of anguish on the cross, ‘Father, why have you forsaken me?’, and subsequent death signal the death of “the secret hope ... that there is a father who has abandoned me” (Žižek 2003: 170). Thus the death of Jesus truly is the death of the “God of beyond” (Žižek 2009a: 29), as in the death-of-God theology of Thomas Altizer (Žižek 2009b: 260).

The experience of the dying big Other has important implications for ideology critique. Even in supposedly secular worldviews and activities, the big Other is still discernible, such as in the market, which functions as a big Other to the extent that we treat it as a “an objective system confronting us” (Žižek 2008a: 453). An effective ideology critique cannot simply state that the big Other does not exist; we must also acknowledge the Real sense in which big Others do exist in our ideologies and our actions, understand that these big Others are not for us but against us (Žižek 2009c: 154), and work to radically undermine them (Žižek 2008a: 35). Here, the idea of the big Other lines up with Bakunin’s view of God, who is necessarily a tyrant that must be abolished if we are to be free. Žižek’s theology effectively says that *to the extent that the big Other does exist, it is necessary to kill it*. To kill the big Other requires us to confront it; a repetition of the stance of Christ, and, before him, Job, who confronts God with the utter meaninglessness of his suffering; refusing any teleological justifications for the status quo, and therefore all ideological legitimation of suffering and injustice. This means that the book of Job provides “the first exemplary case of the critique of ideology in human history” (Žižek 2003: 125). The death of Christ is the death once and for all of any ideological retreat into the reasoning of Job’s theological friends in their justification of his calamities (Žižek 2008b: 179-181).

The next gesture of the Christ-event is the birth of the Holy Spirit, which for Žižek is associated with the collective of believers, the “community deprived of its support in the big Other” (Žižek

2003: 170). Žižek suggests that Christ's statement "where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them" (Matthew 18:20) should be taken literally. This "*nonsubstantial link between individuals*" is the only substantial site of God (Žižek 2006: 80); this allows the community to truly understand that, to paraphrase Gandhi, we must ourselves be the change we want to see in the world, because there is no other (and no Other) who can do it for us (Žižek 2009c: 154).

The community of the Holy Spirit is thus empowered to live a genuine utopia, to "enact[] what, *within the framework of the existing social relations*, appears as "impossible"" (Žižek 2008a: 310). This is motivated by the "state of emergency" inherent to the Christian eschatological understanding that the Event inaugurating the Kingdom has already happened, but at the same time, the work of actualising the Kingdom remains (Žižek 2003: 135-140). There is no big Other guaranteeing the progress of the revolution; there is nothing that can displace our hopes of salvation to another time or another place; it is up to us. This is necessarily a 'Chiliastic' mode of revolution, grounded in openness rather than classical Marxist determinateness; in this sense, Žižek is more Christian than Marxist (Mannheim 1936: 218-219). Žižek suggests "authentic psychoanalytic and revolutionary political collectives" as the primary manifestations of the Holy Spirit today (Žižek 2000: 160).

An irony of Žižek's championing of *materialist* Christianity is that the 'Christian experience' he advocates stems not from the natural outworkings of material historical change, but from an event very far abstracted from our current situation; an event we that know through our own discussion and imaginings rather than direct contact; an event which Žižek does not even believe in, at least in the form in which it is presented in the only available sources – literal bodily resurrection (Wright 2003: 209). This appears increasingly as a Platonic idea arriving from outside history to impact upon history; the apotheosis of idealist conceptions of history (Therborn 1980: 44). Perhaps this kind of idealism is necessary in order to avoid crude and constraining determinism, and certainly to create the blank space necessary for the open, big-Other-less future Žižek desires. In any case, this is another commonality with Bakunin; both, like Weber, take ideas seriously in their ability to impact on materiality, despite their insistence upon a materialist ontology.

'Death of god' theologies are a distinct minority among Christians, let alone dialectical materialists; Žižek's particular twist on theology is rarer still. If Bakunin, Marx and Engels were guilty of looking at the specific expression of Christianity surrounding them and generalising it (McLellan 1987: 5-6), Žižek has the opposite problem; he champions his own specific version of what Christianity 'should' be, although the Christianity that actually exists around him is something very different.

However, many of the lessons Žižek draws from Christianity also appear in slightly different form in the works of orthodox Christian theologians. An example of another vision of 'Christianity as ideology critique and radical material utopia' is found in the French sociologist-theologian and Christian anarchist Jacques Ellul. He was a minority voice himself, and the main book we will draw from is a point-by-point discussion of how 'Really Existing Christianity' has strayed from what it 'should' be (Ellul 1986). Still, it is fruitful to put Žižek into some context by placing him alongside another theologian, closer to the mainstream in that Ellul does not subscribe to the Hegelian reading of Christianity or the death of God paradigm; and yet, he too portrays true

Christianity as a utopian alternative to the current global capitalist order.

For Ellul, Christianity is itself a powerful ideology critique. From the birth of the Jewish nation in liberation from Egypt, to their experiments with a decentralised egalitarian community, to the prophets' relentless critiques of the kings and of neighbouring empires, to Jesus' and Paul's stances towards the Roman Empire (Ellul 1980), Ellul believes that the Bible "always contests political power". It leads to "counterpower", "anti-statism", "an extreme relativizing of everything political"; in short, "an anti-ideology" (1986: 113-116)<sup>22</sup>. Moreover, Christianity in Ellul's view is resolutely opposed to the idealism Marx rightly attacks; "from the very first we have full realism and full materialism. The idea of God does not exist" (1986: 9).

Ellul feels strongly the corruption of 'Really Existing Christianity', that was never intended to be the opium of the people, but has become so (1986: 29). He would likely sympathise with Žižek's suggestion that the true spirit of Christianity is not typically to be found in the church (Ellul 1986: 206). He even uses a separate term, 'X', to indicate the genuine movement of the body of Christ, against the corruption that has claimed the name Christianity; "X is subversive in every respect, and Christianity has become conservative and anti-subversive", deserving all the criticisms lumped upon it by Voltaire, Feuerbach, Marx and Bakunin (1986: 6,11-13). However, Ellul still holds out hope; "Christianity never carries the day decisively against Christ" (1986: 212). Even in the church there exists a revolutionary current, although this is "not the current that society as a whole, and especially the political authorities, recognize as the church" (1986: 132).

Ellul is sympathetic in some ways, yet ultimately opposed, to Death of God theology (1986: 9). In Ellul's account, God is not dead; however, God's self-revelation in Jesus shows that she is *not* the big Other Žižek portrays; the Christian God is not "the one who directs history and is the motive power in politics" (Ellul 1986: 122-123), but the weak, humble anarchist king put to death by the big Other of Jewish and Roman authority; entirely consistent with a Holy Spirit enacted in the love of radically universalist communities. Ellul's account of the Christian utopian community is not a community united around the death of God, but he does share Žižek's sense that it is up to us to enact the radical Christian community. Indeed, Ellul ultimately distinguished between true, revolutionary 'X' and false, ideological Christianity precisely by whether our actions fulfil Christ's teaching; "we are thus forced to *be* Christians or to recognize the falsity of what we believe" (1986: 7). This is entirely consistent with Žižek's 'action' definition of ideology, and perhaps the same remark could be made about many other radical belief-systems.

## Conclusion

We have seen how Bakunin produced a more systematic – if polemical – articulation of the concept that Marx summed up in his famous 'opium of the people' remark (and Žižek adopts the same criticism but applies it to today's New Age spirituality rather than Christianity). We have seen how Althusser provides a more nuanced theoretical framework for understanding Engels' description of the Anabaptist revolts during the German peasant wars. And we have seen how orthodox Christian theologians such as Jacques Ellul also give accounts of the kingdom of God working as a radical counter-ideological utopia, in many of the same ways as Žižek's proposed 'Paulinean materialist'

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<sup>22</sup> Ellul uses ideology in a negative sense that works roughly equivalently to Žižek's definition in this situation; as a pseudoscientific belief that covertly justifies a prior commitment (Ellul 1969: 77-79).

network.

If there is a lesson to be learned from this study, perhaps it is that phenomena such as Religion, Idealism, Ideology, and Revolution intersect, contradict and combine in sometimes unexpected ways. It is always worthwhile to look critically at all four; but in the interests of the fourth term, perhaps we should not too readily reject the first three.

- Caleb Anderson, 26/10/2011

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