

ON THE DEFINITION OF "RELIGION"

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This essay is concerned with the definition of religion. This definition is developed within a context which recognizes the impossibility of value-neutrality in the definition of words. The definition proposed is applied to three complex borderline cases: Spinozism, Marxism, and economism or free-market ideology.

I

It is now far too late to complain of persuasive definitions,¹ as if they constituted a species of intellectual sharp practice. A definition of "violence" that includes *ad hominem* arguments along with rape and arson, or a definition of "fanaticism" that includes Kantians as well as Nazis, can be censured for attempting to win cheap and therefore spurious intellectual victories. But no non-persuasive definition of an evaluatively charged expression is possible.²

In the first place, any definition of a term³ already in use, however lexical its intentions, will reject some actual uses as erroneous or stretched, while at the same time suggesting new uses. Where the term in question is evaluatively charged, such smoothing and generalization of actual patterns of use will have an evaluating dimension. To argue that some things people have called "terrorism" do not deserve the name, or that other things to which people have denied the name do deserve it, is to take a position with strong evaluative implications. To such a conclusion not only conceptual, but also normative, arguments are relevant.

Second, even those relatively neutral definitions C. L. Stevenson calls "detached"⁴ designate some objects (or classes of objects) as worthy of attention; and, for that reason, imply a preference for one of many possible methods of inquiry. Nor is it possible to speak here only of mutually tolerant interests in knowledge. Projects of inquiry are parts of broader research programs, and these in turn are linked to wider social, political, and even religious or anti-religious movements. And what is true of "detached" definitions is true, *a fortiori*, of what Stevenson calls "reemphatic" definitions, i.e., those whose point is to call attention to analogies and distinctions. Such questions must not be regarded as merely verbal, to be settled by majority vote or other authority, so that the



discussion of interesting substantive issues can proceed. For there have been times and places where it has been a matter of dispute, among otherwise reasonable people, whether Jews were human beings.

A value-free definition of "religion" is thus impossible. But the evaluations that shape definitions of religion are particularly complex. Sometimes "religion"—and even more so "theology"—is used in a hostile sense, in polemics against Marxism, for example. At other times "religion" is a good word, used to protect deviants, such as Jehovah's Witnesses or conscientious objectors, against penalties. More subtly, we often encounter the view that religion, while a good thing on the whole, is not to be taken altogether seriously. This view is to be found even among those who habitually take part in religious observances. Some Christian theologians have attempted to evade this attitude by distinguishing (true) Christian faith from (human) religiousness, including cultural deformations of Christianity. But the analogies between every known form of Christianity and Buddhism, for example, are too clear to be evaded by this strategy.

Opportunities for special pleading abound here. Where, as in the United States, the law endeavors to protect religion from government as well as government from religion, the definition of "religion" is an especially sensitive issue. For shifting definitions of "religion" can be used to favor beliefs and institutions with which one is in sympathy, and to penalize those to which one is hostile.⁵

On no view is every form of religion desirable. And to characterize a belief or practice as religious makes an apt polemical point only when it calls attention to a failure of self-knowledge; otherwise a group can happily embrace a characterization of its beliefs and practices as religious. Those who deal professionally with the aftermath of nuclear war, and the influence of the various possible aftermaths on contemporary international politics, are aptly, if polemically, called "nuclear theologians." The expression gets its point both from the unknown character of the subject of their inquiries and the resistance the human imagination displays when confronted with it. (The "god" the nuclear theologians study is of course Kali, with her necklace of skulls.) But for the rest, those who attempt to define "religion" should bear in mind the complexity of the evaluative background, and avoid simple-minded ideological gambits.

II

Two patterns of definition might be attempted. One looks for necessary and sufficient conditions—for sets of properties possessed by all and only religions. A second abandons the search for necessary and sufficient conditions, and looks instead for a set of religion-making characteristics, establishing a family resemblance among the various phenomena called "religion."⁶ Neither pattern of analysis is altogether satisfactory.

Anyone who can find a useful set of necessary and sufficient conditions distinguishing Homeric religion and the more austere forms of Buddhism from all non-religious forms of belief and action will have performed a remarkable feat. But merely to list religion-making characteristics is to leave the subject in as much chaos as one found it: unless we can say that the idea of salvation is more central to religion than the existence of sacred objects, little understanding of religion will be possible.

I take the standard forms of Christianity as my paradigm of religion, rather than Judaism or the movement headed by the Reverend Sun Myung Moon. A consequence of this decision is to make it more difficult (which is not to say impossible) to see religion primarily as a matter of communal affiliation, inherited or voluntary, without essential transcendent reference. My justification for so doing is in part autobiographical, but it gains significant support from ordinary language as well. Someone who takes part in Jewish cultural life without believing in the God of Israel is what people call a nonreligious Jew. But the most important impulse behind my choice of paradigms is philosophical: a desire to have the resulting definition address the question, under what conditions the transcendent can be apprehended by human beings.

Two central criteria for the existence of a religion can be distinguished. Where both of these criteria are present, as in the central forms of Christianity, we can confidently say that a religion is present. When only one is present, whether we call the phenomenon a religion will depend on criteria of a less central sort. When neither is present, the phenomenon will be labeled non-religious.

The first criterion is doctrinal: a religion affirms the existence of one or more superhuman agents, on whose favor the welfare of human beings depends. I say "superhuman," not "supernatural," since not every culture distinguishes between nature and supernature, and some philosophers have argued that the distinction is obsolete even in the West.

A consequence of this criterion is that some forms of belief in flying saucers are halfway at least toward being religious. Extraterrestrials who are indifferent to human beings are no more suitable as objects of religious devotion than are the indifferent gods of Epicurean philosophy. But if someone believes that his well-being depends on maintaining the good will of superior beings inhabiting another planet, he has moved at least a substantial way toward making his belief into a religion.

The second criterion is psychosocial or functional. A religion by the second criterion unifies, through a system of symbolic representations, the framework by which an individual or group regulates its thought and its life, and thus manages to maintain in them some semblance of coherence. Many people will hold that the second criterion is appropriate for the higher religions, whereas the first picks out a class of superstitions. And others will hold that the first criterion

is necessary to the presence of a full-blooded religion, whereas the first alone picks out only watered-down modernistic “faiths.” But—though the issues are not entirely separate—we are not here concerned with good vs. bad religion, but with characteristics common to good and bad religions alike.

Religion is both an individual and a group phenomenon, comprising “faith” in an individual and “tradition” in a group.⁷ An individual’s faith is both stimulated and informed by the tradition he takes as normative, and one important expression of a faith is the transmission of its corresponding tradition (perhaps reformed) to others. Personal faiths that are sustained by, and help sustain, the Christian and Buddhist traditions have enough in common to be discussed together as examples of Christian and of Buddhist faith. This does not mean that Christians and Buddhists are primarily concerned with sustaining Christianity and Buddhism; on the contrary, the central concern of a devout Christian is God (or Christ), and that of a devout Buddhist Nirvana.

Every individual and every group has a framework, an *a priori*: a set of presuppositions which make thought and life possible. It does not follow that every individual or group is religious, even by the second criterion. For a framework can lack unity of any sort, and be a mere inherited conglomerate. Or the adherents of a framework may attempt to give it a unity by means of clear and distinct ideas rather than by means of symbolic representations. They may believe, in the words of Wittgenstein (somewhat ironic in their context), that “what can be said at all can be said clearly, and what we cannot talk about we must pass over in silence.”⁸

By a representation is meant some form of nonliteral speech—say a paradox or a myth—whose point is to convey what cannot be expressed literally. A myth need not be historically false, but it dramatizes whatever historical truth it may contain in order to convey what its adherents believe is a nonhistorical truth. And for many myths the question of historicity does not arise, since they portray in narrative form what happens before or after history. A paradox, taken literally, is self-contradictory and thus false: it asserts, for example, that the same entity is at once unqualifiedly God and unqualifiedly human. But to take a paradox in this way is to miss its point, which is to direct the mind beyond what can be explained literally.⁹ Other forms of nonliteral speech employed in religious discourse include parables (which, unlike myths, do not even look like history), metaphors, action-symbols; and, most austere, statements in which words like “good” are projected by analogy to a subject other than those to which they ordinarily apply. That even analogy is a mode of non-literal speech entails that theology cannot be deductive discipline.¹⁰

Religious representations differ from those involved in popular science, for example, in that they are, or are believed to be, irreducible. Those who employ representations are not infallible about their character. They may be unaware of

the pictorial character of their speech. They may resist the recognition that their speech is pictorial; if so, we can call them “fundamentalists,” without troubling ourselves whether those people called “fundamentalists” are fundamentalists by this definition.¹¹ They may believe that their representations are irreducible, whereas in fact they can be translated without remainder into non-religious terms. Finally, representations intended as merely rhetorical may escape from the control their underlying literal sense: parables designed to evade censorship may take on a life of their own and convey meanings far richer than that of a mere political statement.¹²

Religious representations differ from those involved in ordinary poetry in that they attempt to unify a framework by which an individual or group conducts its thought and life. Such unity is achieved in one or both of two ways. It can be achieved in the ways a work of music, art, or literature is unified, i.e., through narrative structure, recurrent themes or images, and other devices of the same sort. It can also be achieved by directing those who adhere to a religion toward a Supreme Good at which the beliefs and practices characteristic of the religion point.

These two modes of unification are connected, insofar as the Supreme Good, towards which the beliefs and practices characteristic of a religion point, is that which cannot be expressed by ordinary prose, but requires the methods of indirect communication characteristic of religious discourse. And, insofar as one version of the Supreme Good is union or communion with a Supreme Being, on Whose favor the welfare of human beings depends, religion by the second criterion can be linked to religion by the first.

We have now made contact with the tradition for which religion is a matter of a person’s ultimate concern. but a definition in such terms fails to include the religion of Homeric Greece. Hence I employ reference to a Supreme Good as part of one criterion tending to establish that a religion is present, rather than as a necessary and sufficient condition for the existence of a religion. Nonetheless, the notion of a Supreme Good has a more central role than its place in my definitional structure would seem to indicate. For it is the Supreme Good that links the two criteria in a religion like Christianity: it is the possibility of union or communion with God that provides a source of unity in the lives of believers, and to which the representations enacted in Christian practice point.

Sometimes a group or an individual will adopt two religions—in traditional China, Confucianism and Taoism; in Japan, Buddhism and Shinto—each of which deals with aspects of life the other neglects. In such cases, it is worthwhile to explore the possibility that the two traditions may form a compound—say Confucianism/Taoism—capable of being unified in the manner characteristic of religion, if only a suitable prophet or theologian arises.

It is now time to consider the relationship between the two criteria just

expounded and less central criteria, such as the presence of a concept of salvation and the existence of sacred objects. Sacred objects are those that figure in the action-symbols a religion includes. Salvation is release from bondage that is the ordinary lot of human beings and participation in the better world religious representations portray, including participation in the Supreme Good that provides believers with their principle of unity.

Other less central criteria include the existence of an organized community, of a canon of Scripture, of practices such as prayer, and of a characteristic strategy for dealing with those crises that threaten to disrupt the life of an individual or group: maturation, sexuality, childrearing, moral conflict (including guilt), suffering, and especially death. We also expect a religion to embody a protest against those aspects of the existing order that keep human beings in bondage.

Prayer is a natural way of dealing with a superior being, on whose favor we depend. As for organized communities, canons of Scripture and the like, if a set of representations is to be maintained and transmitted to the next generation, it will be necessary to have some regular provision for doing so. (The very existence of religious representations, like any other form of language, requires community support, but not formal organization as such.) Appeal to a Supreme Good, and to that which gives a unity to the life of an individual or group, is particularly likely in time of personal or social crisis—when it becomes apparent that (in the words of the Book of Common Prayer) “we have no power of ourselves to help ourselves.”¹³ And one thing that is hoped for from superior beings is that they should rescue those undergoing crisis, or disfavored by the normal workings of the institutions of their society. But not every way of dealing with crisis or with oppression will count as religious.

III

So much, then, for the definition of religion in general. I now turn to three problem cases for the concept of religion: the philosophy of Spinoza, Marxism, and economism or free market ideology.

A

Stevenson maintains that Spinoza used the word “God” for his Substance because

by giving the word [“God”] a new conceptual meaning Spinoza was enabled to direct its emotional force away from the old anthropomorphic meaning and center it upon substance, which he so earnestly thought

would be a more rewarding object of our wonder and humility. . . .
 But Spinoza “the atheist” was long in giving way to Spinoza “the God-intoxicated man,” for the supporters of orthodoxy were not slow to see that his God was God in emotive meaning only.¹⁴

Another writer would say: Spinoza “the atheist” was slow in giving place to Spinoza “the God-intoxicated man,” because supporters of orthodoxy needed to learn to stop using “atheist” as an all-purpose term of theological abuse, and recognize religious conceptions other than their own, even when in the last resort they continued to regard those conceptions as inadequate.

The issue between such a writer and Stevenson is whether the continuities between Spinoza and St. Anselm are more or less important than the differences. Or again: whether the continuities between Spinoza and St. Anselm are more or less important than the continuities between Spinoza and later scientism and positivism.

The philosophy of Spinoza turns out to be ambiguous on both criteria. Spinoza’s God-or-nature is a Being superior to human beings, on which they depend. And He¹⁵ is also a person, at least in the sense that, like finite persons, He is both thinking and extended (*Ethics*, Pt. II, props. 1 & 2). But to say that our well-being depends on the favor of Spinoza’s God is to imply, or at least suggest, that He has it within His power to grant or withhold His favor. And Spinoza’s God-or-nature acts always out of necessity.

As for the second criterion, whether Spinoza’s framework requires representations to give it a unity depends on how seriously one takes his geometrical method. On its face, Spinoza’s philosophy is a paradigm of the attempt to say everything clearly. But in fact Spinoza’s arguments are far less rigorous than they appear: many of his most important doctrines occur outside the geometrical structure of the *Ethics*.

The function of Spinoza’s geometrical method is to a considerable extent rhetorical: it expresses what Spinoza’s propositions assert, that everything happens with the same necessity that pertains to mathematical propositions. And Spinoza’s *Ethics* is given unity, not so much by its relentless working out of the consequences of a few axioms, as by its presentation of the emanation of all things from God and the return of all things to Him;¹⁶ and by its depiction of a way to blessedness, i.e., a way of returning to God by coming to know that one is part of Him already.

Not only by the central criteria is Spinoza’s philosophy ambiguous: it is also ambiguous by the subordinate ones. Spinoza’s own attitude toward Christianity and Judaism is ambiguous: sometimes he regards the doctrines of these religions as socially useful lies, without which human beings would run amok (Pt. IV, prop. 54, schol.). But at other times he regards them as expressing, in pictorial

form, truths more adequately asserted in his own philosophy (Pt. IV, prop. 68, schol.) Such ambivalence is typical of adherents of new religions confronting those they regard as their predecessors. But the suggestion of a Machiavellian doctrine of the social utility of false religion sets Spinoza apart from Christians considering Judaism.

A Spinozist Church would be hard to imagine. But disciples of Spinoza might come together to study his philosophy, as well as to consider its implications for life. A Spinozist could not consistently pray that his God should make things other than what they inevitably will be. But he might pray, in the manner suggested by D. Z. Phillips, in order to bring himself to accept the inevitable.

In the absence of some practical (e. g., legal) purpose, requiring us to recognize or to refuse to recognize Spinozism as a religion, it is sufficient to notice the features that make it a borderline case. Having said this, I should observe that Spinoza's philosophy appeals to the religious side of my nature, as it has to that of many others. (That is not to say that I believe Spinoza's philosophy to be true.)

B

The best discussion of the question, whether Marxism is a religion, that I know of lists a number of reasons for supposing it to be one before summarily concluding that it is not.¹⁷ It might be clear, at least, that Marxism denies the existence of superhuman persons, "In sooth all gods I hate," writes Marx, quoting Aeschylus.¹⁸ But even here the evidence is ambiguous. Under capitalism, and at all times before the final liberation, human beings according to Marx are subjects of powers (such as the market) that are their superiors in power though not in wisdom: to hate them is not to deny their existence. More important, Marxists have tended to deify what they take to be beneficent forces: History, Revolution, the Dialectic, Stalin. Such deifications are not to be attributed to Marx himself,¹⁹ but they arise from gaps in his theory, and to that extent cannot be ignored by his expounders and defenders. The same may be said of the tendency to give to the writings of the Great Teachers the status of canonical scriptures.

As for the second criterion, Marxism presents a dramatized version of world history, including an account of our past and present misery and our future glory, that in many ways resembles those presented by Christianity and Buddhism. One obstacle to seeing the resemblances between Marxism and these traditions is that older traditions promise salvation to individuals, where as a Marxist who does not live to see the promised end will have only the satisfaction of having died in the cause of the Revolution. But when one considers that Buddhism denies the reality of the self, so that in the strict sense no individual attains Nirvana, the contrast between Marxist and more conventional conceptions of

salvation will seem less acute.

A more serious obstacle to regarding Marxism as a religion is the claim of Marxists that their doctrine is a science. One problem here is the existence of a wide sense of "science," for which any rational discipline, possibly including theology, is a science.²⁰ Marxists are claiming more than this, but there are distinct reasons why their claim to be scientific, in the way physics is thought to be, cannot be taken seriously.

One has to do with the nature of the social sciences (including history), to which Marxism has made its most central contributions. Even in physics the religious and ideological beliefs of the scientist (Newton's Arianism, Einstein's Spinozism) influence the perceptions of relative simplicity crucial to the formulation of theories. But it is not necessary to look to claims about the cosmos as a whole to feel the impact of conflicting visions of human life on the social science. In particular the influence of statements made by social scientists and historians on the behavior of human beings guarantees that no rigorous predictions will be possible, and that even the most objective-seeming social scientific discourse will have a heavy lacing of advocacy. And economics, which at one time at least formed the core of the Marxist intellectual program, suffers from a peculiar limitation: it works from a limited conception of human motivation, which human beings are always both rising above and falling below.

The inherent limitations of the social sciences mean that ideology will always play a central role in their structure. And the role played by ideology could equally well be played by religion. And those who believe that Marxism is a religion will argue that, in this case, we have a religion supporting a research program in the social sciences as well as a mode of political rhetoric and political practice.

But there are also reasons peculiar to Marxism why its scientific status could be questioned and its resemblance to what are conventionally regarded as religions emphasized. It is a central Marxist doctrine that not only the activity of human beings, but also their thought, is distorted under capitalism. Only under communism will undistorted cognition be possible. Hence it something of a mystery how Marx could rise above his circumstances and discover the truth about human society. Thus Marxists are led to ascribe to their authors a mode of insight that transcends the merely human; and, in the same way, to personify the processes (or even to deify the agents) that are supposed to produce the transition to a better society.

In a Marxist context actions, institutions, and moralities are to be evaluated by their tendency to bring about, or to retard, a state of affairs both distant in time and indefinite in nature. Even those Marxists who regard the Party as a body of experts who know the way to this state of affairs, and Marxist doctrine as the physics that corresponds to their engineering, quickly exhibit more than

merely scientific considerations. The heroic character of the assumption that anyone now alive knows the way to utopia—and the fact that no one now alive will live to experience it—makes it hard to see how belief in the Party's authority could long be sustained, apart from psychosocial mechanisms similar to those that sustain religious commitment.

When we turn to secondary criteria, we are again confronted with an ambiguity. A Marxist will not pray (except, in extreme cases, to Stalin or Mao), though he may take part in rituals designed to reinforce solidarity with his political allies and commitment to his political ends. As far as the psychosocial dimension of Marxism is concerned, the analogies with Christianity write themselves: conversion and apostasy, heresy and schism, anathemas, greater or less degrees of fervor in the faith—all of these have counterparts in a Marxist context. And three further analogies can be stressed, the search for a pure Marxism uncorrupted by Stalin, Lenin, Engels, or even the mature Marx; the dilemma of centrally imposed orthodoxy vs. a situation of chaos, in which Marxist rhetoric is used to advance virtually any political claim;²¹ and the fact that those who no longer consider themselves Marxists (or who never considered themselves such) may still exhibit Marxist instinctive responses.

Special mention should be given to a feature of the situation of contemporary men and women that contributes to the appeal of Marxism and other political ideologies. Human beings have always suffered, and been unable to understand the causes of their suffering. Birth, maturity, sexuality, the rearing of children, and death have always been sources of crisis in human life. But contemporary people suffer from a peculiar set of problems: efforts to control the circumstances in which human beings live, and to make their institutions responsive to their needs, have issued in practices that even highly educated people are unable to understand.

Hence arises one source of political conflict, which cuts across the usual categories of Left and Right, between those who claim a right to the attention of others by reason of their ability to hold together many diverse sorts of data, and those who claim attention by reason of their capacity to simplify the data with the help of a few burning symbols. The most conspicuous sorts of political ideology (Marxism among them) get their influence through the second sort of claim.

But the feature of the contemporary human situation that supports political ideologies is one of many aspects of the predicament that supports religious doctrines and practices. The identities of contemporary men and women, and their capacity to conduct their lives in a coherent fashion, are threatened not only by death, suffering, and guilt; but also by institutions which, though they regard them as the products of their own activity, they are unable to understand and control. The limits on human knowledge, power, and self-command thus

support modes of rhetoric that promise escape from the resulting predicament.

A final feature of Marxism that renders it similar to Christianity is its exclusivity, the fact that a thoroughgoing Marxist cannot accept Christian or other traditional religious belief. Exclusivity is not a universal feature of religions, but its presence supports the classification of a phenomenon as religious. When this aspect of Marxism is abandoned, the case against regarding Marxism as a religion is very strong. When taken at its maximum claim Marxism is a religion; but Marxists have the ability to retreat, under practical or theoretical pressure, from their maximum claim and support Marxism only as a mode of political rhetoric or a research program for the social sciences. And this capacity is a feature, not only of Marxism, but of political ideologies generally.

C

Of the rivals to Marxism among contemporary ideologies, I propose to consider here only “economism,” or the belief that the market is the sole or at least the decisive criterion of value, including that of human beings and their activities.²² More fully, the adherent of economism²³ believes that the market is not merely one of the many ways in which human beings obtain goods and services, but one whose outcomes have a specially legitimate status. In contrast, to persuade others that considerations of justice or the common good require that one receive some benefit is to be, presumptively at least, a parasite. Economism holds that market conceptions are so tightly bound up with the idea of rationality that dissatisfaction with, or even ambivalence about, the workings of a capitalist economy can be ascribed to defects of character. Any claim not honored by the market is presumed to be frivolous, dishonest, or irrational.²⁴

Adherents of economism frequently personify the market: they speak of what the market is trying to tell us. And, when they do so, it is fair to regard them as treating the market as a superhuman person, on whose favor the welfare of human beings depends. Doubt as to whether economism is a religion must therefore rest on the second criterion—in particular on the claim that we have here a mere manner of speaking, though one which has an important effect in securing acquiescence in the operations of the market even when these adversely affect the important interests of individuals or groups. It is assumed that at least some people have good reasons for accepting a market system, reasons which can be stated without reference to such pictures, but that other people either lack such reasons or are unable to appreciate their force.

And it does seem that economism is not a religion by the second criterion. Adherents of economism do not seem to unify their frameworks by means of a set of representations. And the good at which adherents of economism aim is nothing like union with God, but rather freedom to pursue the good as one

conceives it (in one version, to join with others to construct one's conception of Utopia).²⁵ And that a capitalist economy is best capable of accomplishing this result is thought to be demonstrable by reason alone.

The most sophisticated argument for this claim maintains that a market economy is essential, not only to individual, but also to collective, liberty. It depends on a capitalist political economy as a way of dealing with the instability of democratic political institutions, in the absence of a shared, stable, conception of the good with whose help discussions about the allocation of benefits and burdens could be made.²⁶ The fear that underlies this argument is that the distribution of goods will come to depend so much on shifting majorities that men and women will rebel against the resulting insecurity and turn to authoritarian rule to rescue them from institutional chaos. The question, what will be the effect of maintaining or changing the economic status quo upon the functioning of political democracy, is thus central to discussions among liberal democrats and democratic socialists.

But the reply of the opponents of free market ideology to the political argument for capitalism should be clear. There is something paradoxical about the attempt to protect democratic institutions by removing from their scope those questions about which human beings most intensely care. And to deny or limit severely the capacity of men and women to invoke democratic processes to control economic structures is to open these processes to corruption by those having at their disposal concentrations of economic power.

The purpose of these critical remarks is not to settle long-standing ideological disputes, but to call attention to the pictorial representations that underly economic arguments, and cause some people to find the political argument for capitalism more plausible than that of its opponents and critics. These include the picture of property rights as somehow attached to individuals, so that they can survive the demise of all other institutions; the picture of a private domain into which one can retreat to escape the (often conflicting) demands of other people; the notion that the market is something other than the decisions of human beings as buyers and sellers, something that can make painful decisions without anyone having to take responsibility for them; and the picture of an invisible hand which will somehow guarantee that the economic, though not for some reason the political, institutions of capitalist society will work well. To these may be added a conception of freedom that treats the exclusive ownership of material goods as central, and the chance to join with others in the pursuit of shared goods as peripheral.

All of these pictures are capable of forming part of a total myth governing every aspect of human life. They do not usually do so, however and the most plausible such myth—which works from Darwin's theory of human evolution to an evaluation of human institutions in terms of their ability to survive—is as characteristic of Marxism as it is of the defense of the free market.

Turning to subsidiary criteria, adherents of economism do not pray to the market, nor is there anything approaching an economistic church. And one feature of economism that sharply differentiates it from Christianity and Judaism, as well as from Marxism, is that, in societies in which the market has a large role to play in determining the allocation of benefits and burdens, its effect is to confirm men and women in the belief that present social advantages and disadvantages are deserved. To adapt a phrase of Galbraith's, its role is to comfort the comfortable as well as further to afflict the afflicted. Yet this feature of economism is shared by Hinduism in some of its aspects (the doctrine of karma).

Economism is similar to religions like Christianity in that it subjects human beings to a power other than themselves. But the "god" of economism is something plainly less than his worshippers: their activity as buyers and sellers. Whereas Marxism proposes to liberate us from bondage to such powers, economism celebrates that very bondage. Yet, at a deeper level, Marxism and economism may be seen to be united in their adherence to the central Spinozistic doctrine, that freedom is submission to necessity.

It has been said that all disputes are ultimately theological. In a sense this statement is true, since any dispute, unless somehow controlled, widens into a dispute about the nature of the universe. But human beings sometimes succeed in pursuing their ends and resolving their disputes without addressing their most fundamental disagreements. Hence science and political ideology can be distinguished from religion, by the fact that they stop short of presenting a total picture of the universe.

But there is no such thing as secular humanism, at least in the sense that has emerged in recent political controversy. There are assorted attempts to advance good causes while avoiding disputed theological and anthropological issues. There is a group of avowed secular humanists, whose principal activity is to publish some rather pathetic manifestoes. And there is a variety of non-theistic worldviews, which have grown up both outside and within the churches. But none of these add up to a coherent secular humanist movement, which a reflective person could embrace as an alternative to Christianity.

Supernature abhors a supervacuum. And if Christianity continues to lose its grip on the consciousness of the West, we may expect to see an increasing number of remarkable substitutes.²⁷

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NOTES

1. The concept of a persuasive definition was introduced by C. L. Stevenson; see his *Ethics and*

Language (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1965), chs. 9, 13; and his *Facts and Values* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1964), ch. 3. Stevenson denies, not very convincingly, that his account is intended as derogatory.

2. On the importance of evaluatively charged expressions, as well as their logic, see Julius Kovesi, *Moral Notions* (New York: Humanities Press, 1969).

3. I do not here enter the controversy over real definitions. Whether or not things can be defined, terms certainly can be.

4. *Ethics and Language*, pp. 282-290. On re-emphatic definitions, see pp. 290-294.

5. The issues are spotlighted in James Hitchcock, "Church, State, and Moral Values," *Law and Contemporary Problems*, Spring, 1981, esp. pp. 18-19, and the other articles in the same issue. The most important judicial discussion is in *United States vs. Seeger*, 380 U.S. 163 (1965); see also the thoughtful concurring opinion of Circuit Judge Adams in *Malnak vs. Yogi*, 502 F. 2d. 197, 200-215 (1979).

6. For an example of a family-resemblance analysis of "religion," see W. P. Alston, "Religion," *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Paul Edwards ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1967), vol. 7, pp. 140-145.

7. Wilfrid Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion* (New York: Macmillan, 1963), esp. ch. 5.

8. *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, D. F. Pears and B. F. McGuinness trs. (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1963), p. 3.

9. Kierkegaard, or at least Johannes Climacus, is quite explicit in his insistence that Christianity, which paradoxically claims that God has existed in a historical individual, is not a doctrine—not an appropriate object of intellectual apprehension—but an indirect communication expressing an aspect of the human situation not otherwise communicable. *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, David F. Swenson, tr., Walter Lowrie ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968), pp. 290-291, 339. Not seeing this point makes Kierkegaard seem much more of an irrationalist than he in fact is.

10. See Humphrey Palmer, *Analogy* (London: Macmillan, 1973), esp. ch. 13.

11. Some are; e.g., R. G. Sproul, "Biblical Interpretation and the Analogy of Faith," *Inerrancy and Common Sense*, Roger B. Nicole and J. Ramsey Michaels eds., (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker, 1980), ch. 5. Others are not; e.g., J. Ramsey Michaels, "Inerrancy or Verbal Inspiration?" and John Jefferson Davis, "Genesis, Inerrancy, and the Antiquity of Man," *ibid.*, chs. 2, 6. An intermediate case is J. L. Packer, "*Fundamentalism*" and *the Word of God* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1972), pp. 99, 104-106.

12. A possible example is Leszek Kolakowski, *The Key to Heaven and Conversations with the Devil*, Celia Wieniewska and Salvator Attanasio trs. (New York: Grove Press, 1972).

13. Collect, Second Sunday in Lent.

14. *Facts and Values*, pp 41-42.

15. The capitalized pronoun may seem to tilt the text unfairly toward a religious interpretation of Spinoza. But, on a nonreligious interpretation, the proper pronoun for "God-or-nature" is not "he" (or "she"), but "it."

16. See Henry Austin Wolfson, *The Philosophy of Spinoza* (Cleveland: Meridian, 1963), vol. 1, pp. 372-376, 397-398.

17. Owen Chadwick, *The Secularization of the European Mind in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge:

Cambridge University Press, 1975), pp. 65-69.

18. Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *On Religion* (New York: Schocken, 1971), p. 15.

19. "History does nothing. . ." he writes, "[It] is *nothing* but the activity of men in pursuit of their ends." *Selected Writings in Sociology and Social Philosophy*, T. B. Bottomore tr., T. B. Bottomore and Maximilien Rubel eds. (New York: McGraw Hill, 1964), p. 63.

20. See St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Ia., art. 1, q. 2.

21. This dilemma is central to the interpretation of the rise and fall of Marxism given in Kolakowski, *Main Currents in Marxism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), esp. vol. 3.

22. I owe the expression "economism" to John Paul II, *On Human Work (Laborem Exercens)* (Boston: Daughters of St. Paul, n. d.), sec. 13. I do not claim papal authority for my use of it.

23. Unfortunately, economism, like scientism, lacks an appropriate word for its adherents. Economists by profession tend to economism, but not all yield to it.

24. Ernest van den Haag, ed., *Capitalism: Sources of Hostility* (New Rochelle, New York: Arlington, 1979). See especially Lewis S. Feuer, "Some Irrational Sources of Hostility to the Market System."

25. Robert Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* (New York: Basic Books, 1974).

26. For example, Dan Usher, *The Economic Prerequisite to Democracy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981).

27. Work on this essay was begun at Amelie Rorty's 1982 NEH Summer Seminar. I am indebted to Robert J. Rafalko, Edward Sankowski, and the editor of *Faith and Philosophy* for their comments on an earlier draft.