# Mission in Modern Life:
# A Public Role for Religious Beliefs

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**ABSTRACT:** In this paper I discuss recent scholarly work on ideology, mostly by Europeans, that exposes a secularist bias in current political theory, invites a nonderogatory concept of religion, and (I argue) justifies more flexible church/state relations. This work involves (1) redefining ideology as any action-oriented ideas, whether destructive or ameliorative, including both secular theory and religion, then (2) drawing on hermeneutical and critical studies of the power/ideology relationship to rediscover a role for 'utopia' as a social catalyst for amelioration. I then call attention to the relevance of 'mission' to this work. For in both secular and sacred contexts, missions are defined and assigned to individuals or groups to enhance some aspect of the organizing entity's sense of purpose and possibility. What stands out in each instance is that the sense of mission is not passively epistemic but actively project-oriented, goal-directed. It can be used with reference to any end or goal that is at least implicitly normative and which people seek to attain. A mission moves people, however, only if it is tied to some belief-based social identity which can be interpreted as oriented to that end. A case can be made, accordingly, for accommodating religious views in our political discourse, for they have a history of directing people's thinking beyond what is to what ought to be, and without them we are ever more inclined to tolerate mediocrity in ourselves and despair in others.

While secular theorists continue fine-tuning their exclusivist model of the public sphere, others see a need to open the public forum to multiple voices, including those of religious groups. In particular, recent post-Marxist reconsideration of the concept of ideology, mainly in Europe, invites some modification of absolute separation. This reconsideration involves two phases. First ideology is redefined as any action-oriented ideas whether destructive or ameliorative including both secular theory and religion. Then hermeneutical and critical studies of the power/ideology relationship help us rediscover the role of 'utopia' as a social catalyst for amelioration.

As exemplified by Newspeak in George Orwell's Nineteen-Eighty-Four: destructive ideology is used not to convey information but to provide a truth-indifferent rationale for institutional policies and practices. Such obfuscation has been a government staple, not just in the former Soviet Union but in the West as well, where governments have misrepresented their coercive activities as fending off "bandits" earlier in the twentieth century and "terrorists" more recently. What matters for my purposes is that one might

similarly appeal to religious beliefs to justify pursuing a goal that is not obviously religious at all.(1)

Special terminology is needed, then, to distinguish religious beliefs from mobilized religion. For this purpose some writers(2) use the term 'worldview' (in German, Weltanschauung), and others rely on 'ideology.' 'Worldview' encompasses both religious and secular beliefs, as does 'visionof the world' or 'mentality,' which some historians favor. (3) But none of these implies a call to action. The term 'ideology', though action-oriented, tends to be associated only with nonreligious ideas. But some writers are beginning to apply it to religious ideas that inspire action.

The term 'ideology' seems suitable for discussing religious activism. But militating against this usage are the various ways in which the term has been used and is still understood by many scholars. As reported in his 1976 study of the use of 'ideology' among Anglo-American social and political theorists, British political theorist Martin Seliger found that scholars typically announce a stipulative definition, which may be either restrictive or inclusive. The restrictive definition, still favored when he was writing, is applied only to extremist belief systems and parties, in particular those, such as fascism and communism, that are associated with totalitarianism. The inclusive definition, which he espoused, "covers sets of ideas by which men posit, explain and justify ends and means of organized social action." Thus understood, ideology is "a belief system by virtue of being designed to serve on a relatively permanent basis . . . to ensure concerted action for the preservation, reform, destruction or reconstruction of a given order.(4)

This definition of ideology embraces politicized religion. Its principal fault lies in the word 'designed', which implies that the political use of a doctrine is somehow intended from the outset rather than being so used adventitiously and even unconsciously. Seliger also perpetuates the prejudice common among academicians that ideology is inferior to theory. Some political theorists consider such hierarchization undemocratic.(5) But French phenomenologist Paul Ricoeur has suggested that theory is inferior to ideology, which he identifies with "the symbolic structure of social life."

A decade ago, Ricoeur recommended that ideology be thought of as "a language of real life which exists before all distortions, a symbolic structure of action that is absolutely primitive and ineluctable." So understood it is "not something that is taught, but rather something within which we think."(6) He did not then challenge the common assumption among academic liberals that an ideology is based on secular rather than religious ideas; nor did he discuss the opposite Marxist tendency to associate only religious ideas with ideology. But he has since taken up a theme common among neo-Marxists, namely, that ideology needs to be broadened to take into account the political use of appeals to science and technology in advanced capitalist societies.(7) Even more important, he also recommends including both past- and future-oriented views.

In historical terms 'ideology' dates only from the late eighteenth century. But learned awareness of deliberate misinformation preceded the term itself by several centuries, as in Francis Bacon's idols of the tribe, cave, market, and theater, Machiavelli's distinction between thought of the palace and thought of the public square, and Hume's sensitivity to "feigning" in his History of England.(8) Then the French philosophes used 'ideology' to identify their new study of the ideas of ordinary people as distinguished from those of priests and professors. But Napoleon Bonaparte, associating the term with the democratic leanings of these scholars, used it pejoratively. Marx did so as well, but only with regard to the ideas of the ruling class; and scholars ever since have tended to apply the concept, selectively, to distorted thought which they disfavor.(9)

Marx and Freud after him associated religion with 'illusions.' For Freud, religion is an illusion that involves truth-claims which are notonly not yet verified but ultimately unverifiable. An illusion, he tells us, is a belief which may or may not be true (in contrast to a delusion, which is false) under a particular set of circumstances. Religious ideas, though, are insusceptible of proof. They assert something about external or internal reality which "one has not discovered for oneself and which lay claim to one's belief."(10)

In 1939 Freud had to flee to London as the Nazis occupied Vienna. At about the same time two other writers for whom ideology was an important concept also had to deal with it in their personal lives. Karl Mannheim, a Hungarian Jew who had become a professor of sociology in Germany, also fled to London when the Nazis came to power. A few years earlier in Italy, the Fascists had put the director of the Italian Communist Party Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937) in prison, where he secretly kept the famous notebooks most of which were rescued after his death.

Gramsci identified ideology as a mode of thinking accessible to the masses which is more advanced than but functionally equivalent to religion as a political motivator. Religion, however, is more likely to be used to maintain conformity to an established social system(11); so if people are to aspire to social betterment they need to reach a higher level of thinking. The social instrument for bringing about this higher thinking is the collective will, which as political party and as popular government is the modern equivalent of Machiavelli's Prince.

The Prince, said Gramsci, is a utopian work in that the Prince exists only as a pure theoretical abstraction, with which the people are merged in the epilogue. The ideational instrument is philosophy, which, according to Gramsci's most often quoted words, involves "criticism and the superseding of religion and 'common sense'." The only philosophy that has an impact on the masses, however, is a "philosophy of praxis" that opens people to a "higher conception of life" to which they adhere not through reason but on faith. This faith is not in doctrines but in the social group with which the masses identify, as it were organically rather than in response to some arbitrary movement. If in fact they do so, an "equation between philosophy and politics, thought and action" can be achieved which satisfies "the real critical test of the rationality and historicity of modes of thinking."(12) In short, Gramsci recognized both past- and future-oriented ideologies but gave priority of place to the latter.

Mannheim's Ideology and Utopia (German edition, 1929) appeared just as fascism was emerging in Europe. In this seminal work he argued that ideologies, which are conservative, are challenged by utopias, which are future-oriented and potentially transformative of social structures. He won little support for this vision of ideology and utopia in competition with one another, but each has been studied separately. Moreover, absolutism still set the standard for the social sciences when his work appeared; so (until recently) critics needed only label the pragmatic if not postmodern aspects of his approach as relativistic or internally inconsistent.(13) He himself warned that absolutism encourages a false sense of superiority while concealing the meaning of the present situation. This meaning, he claimed, drawing on Marx and Freud, lies hidden in political actors' unconscious, even irrational, motivations. These the political sociologist needs to unmask and combine into a comprehensive whole.(14) What one is offered for analysis, however, are variously conflicting ideas, some favoring stability and others favoring change.

Hegel had argued that history emerges out of their dialectic interaction; but, says Mannheim, the roots of such interaction are to be found in"much deeper-lying vital and elemental levels of the psyche." To make sense out of this complex political turmoil, he proposed as heuristic devices the concepts of ideology and utopia, which, he admitted, are "slogan-like," constitute a "crude dichotomy," and are difficult to sort out because "the

utopian and ideological elements do not occur separately in the historical process." He hoped, however, that they could be used heuristically to analyze the political interaction between ideas that favor the status quo and those that envision change for the better.(15)

Max Weber had also identified a kind of dualism at work in social group motivation, positing a seemingly less rational force as the challenger of the status quo, namely, charisma. According to Weber, an ideology may be based on views of a philosopher-ideologue such as Marx, the teachings of a political philosopher, or a religious authority. Any of these may underlie a "rationality of purpose" (Zweckrationalitaet) that is inherent in merely practiced beliefs. These form a system to the extent that they contribute significantly to the cohesion of a social entity. Charisma, by contrast, is for Weber a change-oriented view whose adherents apply to it the sacredness others ascribe to existing institutions.

In the latter half of the twentieth century, these dualisms have been modified in various ways and may not survive the emergence of postmodernism.(16) Martin Seliger in particular has tried to show how sacred and secular beliefs perform comparable functions; but in so doing he comes close to eliminating their difference. Says Seliger, a merely practical belief system "stands in the same relation to ideology as religion to theology. Where there is religion and no theology, the belief system is made known in order to be practiced; the practices are left unexplained beyond their immediate significance and purpose. Theology adds self-consciously rational argument to sustain the beliefs and rituals as a system." Moreover, a religion-based system may clash with one based on secular ideas.(17) But so may any distinct beliefs in any combination as to sacred or secular content. What is more, Seliger's broad definition of ideology, noted above, seems to envision these separate paths somehow meeting. This functional interconnectedness is further elaborated by various approaches to interpreting language and culture on the Continent.

Following the lead of structuralists and semiologists, who find unexamined meanings in every aspect of a culture, French neo-Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser focuses on ideology as an instrument of the state—more particularly, as the key instrument by means of which primarily private-sphere enterprises do what the state itself does through violence (i.e., coercion), namely, support the state. Such private-sphere activity involves what he calls Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs); that of the state, the (Repressive) State Apparatus. For Althusser, then, an ideology is a representation of the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence. It involves illusion, as Marx and Freud had contended, so has no history; but it is used in a particular historical context and accordingly also involves allusion, that is, it alludes to reality. Thus understood, ideology is broad enough to include politicized religion; and Althusser, like most Marxists, explicitly includes in his list of ideologies (ISAs) one variant which he calls "religious ideology."(18)

Some non-Marxist scholars have also associated religion with ideology. This association is implicit, for example, in Weber's broad concept of a rationality of purpose. More recently, as suggested, structuralist and semiotic analyses of culture bypass the sacred/secular bifurcation at leaston functional grounds.(19) The work of some American scholars has also helped call attention to functional similarities. Shils saw the sacred as central to an ideological orientation; and in the same vein a book about political ideologies is entitled, as if about things sacred, Dogmas and Dreams. A philosopher's study of Confucianism involves, according to its subtitle, The Secular as Sacred. Inversely, Michael Walzer, a political theorist, and Robert Wuthnow, a sociologist of culture, refer to politicized religious ideas as ideology.(20) The most thorough treatment of this overlap to date, however, is to be found in Paul Ricoeur's more recent writing.

Ricoeur now urges scholars to deal with both ideology and utopia in such a way as not to claim any privileged position from which to judge a group's social identity. To this end, he recommends combining the respective strengths of critical theory and hermeneutics into a "situated" critique of the social imaginary. The desired result: a stable but ever correctable "theory of cultural imagination." Contributors to this theory should strive to work with a non-derogatory concept of group self-identification and deal not with "misunderstandings," as hermeneuticist Hans Gadamer prefers, but with the interests that underlie public knowledge-claims, as does critical theorist Jürgen Habermas. The ideology/utopia tension, as asserted by Mannheim, needs to be included as a part of this theory-building. For, if either is left unchallenged it can (but need not) become pathological (ideology as distortion and concealment; utopia as schizophrenia); and each is a corrective of the other.(21)

Clearly, then, academic usage now tolerates blurring the edges of the distinction between the sacred and the secular as motive forces. But both 'ideology' and 'worldview' falter at the divide between thought and action, mind and will. This is problematic, especially because, as Marx recognized, some individuals in a group may be moved to action with little if any understanding of or appreciation for the ideas that, to others, underlie or motivate that action.(22) It does not follow from this, however, that those less well informed act on the basis of falsehood, as some analysts of ideology claim. Nor is it necessary to avoid cognitivist explanations by saying that they follow a fetish, saving the term 'ideology' for after-the-fact justifications. For, their participation is not unwitting, still less irrational, but is likely to be prospectively emotive and etiologically associational.(23) What matters, in other words, is that they identify themselves, and are identified by others, with a set of beliefs at least to the point that they can under appropriate conditions be moved to act in behalf of those beliefs as cause and end of action. For, what motivates people to participate in a cause or movement is not so much a set of doctrines as it is the belief-related group identity that comes with such participation. Suitable language is needed to express this commitment to a cause.

Given the present fluidity of mainstream terminological options, I am inclined to substitute another term that conveys much of the meaning and complexity these issues entail, namely, 'mission'. For in both secular and sacred contexts missions are defined and assigned to individuals or groups to enhance some aspect of the organizing entity's sense of purpose and possibility. What stands out in each instance is that the sense of mission is not passively epistemic but actively project-oriented, goal-directed. It does not lack intellectual content, but as stated for the record (the 'mission statement') it points beyond what is to what ought to be. It is, in brief, an end, and it is up to those who seek it to settle on suitablemeans. The term 'mission', then, can be used with reference to any end or goal that is at least implicitly normative and which people seek to attain. A mission moves people, however, only if it is tied to some belief-based social identity which can be interpreted as oriented to that end. The beliefs appealed to may be deemed either secular or religious; but what matters here, in spite of the declarations of Gramsci and others, is that religious beliefs can and do motivate missions aimed at advancing the public good.

Seemingly secular missions were of course undertaken on the basis of religious beliefs throughout the history of Western civilization, long before anyone thought of toleration, or keeping politics out of the pulpit, or, for that matter, of ideology. Religious beliefs available in the Judaeo-Christian catalog sufficed to stimulate an eventually successful abolitionist movement in the United States, then movements to extend suffrage to women, then to contain corporate greed and environmental degradation. In the 1980s, comparable underpinning of anti-Soviet protests was also a factor in Poland, then East Germany, and other countries as well. A strong case can be made, accordingly, for accommodating religious views in our political discourse. For, they have a history of directing people's

thinking beyond what is to what ought to be; and without them we are ever more inclined to tolerate mediocrity in ourselves and despair in others.

## NOTES

(1) See E. Herman and G. O'Sullivan, *The "Terrorism" Industry* (New York: Pantheon, 1989). Regarding political exploitation of religious beliefs, see J.A. Aho, *Religious Mythology and the Art of War* (London: Aldwych, 1981); J. Ferguson, *War and Peace in the World's Religions* (London: Sheldon, 1977).

(2) N. Smart, Worldviews, 2nd ed. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1995: 2; E. Balibar, *Masses, Classes, Ideas*, tr. J. Swenson (New York: Routledge, 1995): 102-07.

(3) M. Vovelle, *Ideologies and Mentalities*, tr. E. O'Flaherty (Cambridge: Polity, 1990): 3-9.

(4) M. Seliger, *Ideology and Politics* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1976): 13-14, 29-31, 120. See K. Nielsen, "A Marxist Conception of Ideology," in *Ideology, Philosophy and Politics*, ed. A. Parel (Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier Univ. Press, 1983): 139-41.

(5) N.S. Love, ed., *Dogmas and Dreams* (Chatham, NJ: Chatham House, 1991): Introd.; L.P. Baradat, *Political Ideologies*, 2nd ed. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1984): 5-10.

(6) P. Ricoeur, *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, ed. G.H. Taylor (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1986): 8, 77, 120.

(7) P. Ricoeur, *From Text to Action*, tr. K. Blamey and J.B. Thompson (London: Athlone, 1991): 187, 251, 254-55, 323-24.

(8) K. Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia*, tr. L. Wirth and E. Shils, new ed. (London: Routledge, 1991): 55-56; K. Minogue, "Bacon and Locke: Or Ideology as Mental Hygiene," in Parel, op. cit., pp. 184-89.

(9) Seliger, op. cit., p. 22.

(10) S. Freud, *The Future of an Illusion*, tr. W.D. Robson Scott, ed. J. Strachey (London: Hogarth, 1962): 21, 26-27, 33. In this work, Freud declared that religion might be "the universal obsessional neurosis of humanity; like the obsessional neurosis of children, it arose out of the Oedipus complex, out of the relation to the father" (ibid., p. 39).

(11) A. Gramsci, *Further Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, ed. and tr. D. Boothman (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1995): 44, 55-58, 352-53, 383-89.

(12) Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, ed. and tr. Quentin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1971): 326, 125-33, 147-57, 195-97, 325-44, 356-57, 376-77; 1995: xx.

(13) S. Hekman, "Reinterpreting Mannheim," *Theory Cultures and Society* 3:1 (1986): 137-42; Ricoeur, op. cit. (1986): 8, 253.

(14) Mannheim, op. cit., pp. 5, 28, 33-35, 43, 62-80, 93.

(15) Ibid., pp. 36, 87-96, 178, 183, 191.

(16) See E. Shils, "Ideology and Civility: On the Politics of the Intellectual," *The Sewanee Review* 66 (1958): 66; Seliger, op. cit., pp. 72-88.

(17) Seliger, op. cit., pp. 96-97.

(18) L. Althusser, *Essays on Ideology* (London: Verso, 1984): 17-19, 25-26, 33-34, 51-57, 88.

(19) Semiotician Roland Barthes, for example, once analyzed the meaning of American evangelist Billy Graham's preaching extravaganza in Paris in a manner methodologically indistinguishable from his analyses of a movie, theatrical production, clothing style, art exhibit, or industrial strike. See Barthes, op. cit., pp. 99-102.

(20) The books cited are, respectively, Love, op. cit.; H. Fingarette, *Confucius* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972); M. Walzer, *The Revolution of the Saints* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1965); R. Wuthnow, *Communities of Discourse* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1989)

(21) Ricoeur, op. cit. (1991), pp. 181-87, 205, 246-308. For an example of the more typical academic view, that utopian thinking is detrimental to human wellbeing, see A.W. Gouldner, *The Dialectic of Ideology and Technology* (London: Macmillan, 1976): 87-89.

(22) This is one reason why Marx rejected Hegel's account of history as ideas in action. It may also explain why the term 'ideology' does not appear anywhere in his *Capital*. See Balibar, op. cit., pp. 88-89.

(23) O. Balaban, *Politics and Ideology* (Aldershot: Avebury, 1995): xx, 69-73, 97, 120; K. Graham, *Karl Marx, Our Contemporary* (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1992): 62.