

On the Development of Scientific Socialist Religious Outlook from the Interpretation of “Religion is the Opium of the People”

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Abstract: The formation of the Marxist religious outlook is a historical process. At the beginning of the founding of New China, we copied the Soviet model on religious policies; during the Cultural Revolution, all kinds of religions are suppressed. In the new period, the scientific socialist religious outlook is formed based on the reality of a socialist society. This paper takes the historical process of interpreting Marx’s “religion is the opium of the people” as an example, and outlines this period of history.

1. Introduction

The contemporary Marxist religious view is called as the scientific socialist religious outlook. As we all know, since the founding of the New China, China has made some detours in dealing with religious issues. Later, with the combination of the Marxist historical materialism, the Marxist religious outlook with Chinese characteristics was gradually formed.

2. The History of Interpreting “Religion is the Opium of the People”

2.1 Historical review on scholars’ interpretation and research on “religion is the opium of the people”

(1) Since the 1980s, there have been some disputes about Marx’s opinion, “religion is the opium of the people”. This controversy was once called as the “Opium War in the ideological circle”. Some scholars, such as Ji-an Zhang, believe that the opinion reveals “the most fundamental attribute of religion, and scientifically clarifies the essence and social role of religion... It is the theoretical cornerstone and core of Marxism on religious issues, as well as the fundamental position and the guiding principle of our study on Marxism.”^[1] At that time, there were a number of scholars who held this view. Da-ji Lv, a famous Chinese religious scholar, holds the same view.^[2] Since then, the two scholars have published a series of articles on Marx’s view that “religion is the opium of the people”. The opinions in these articles are consistent with those ideas mentioned above, but are more in-depth.

(2) Since 1983, the older generation of Marxism scholars in China has proposed that we should understand Marx’s “religion is the opium of the people” more comprehensively and accurately. These researchers include Zhu-feng Luo, Da-yi Yin and Fu-san Zhao. Generally speaking, their point of view is that when Marx said this sentence, he did not regard it as the definition of religion. The opinion should be understood in the light of the context. In addition, “We should study Marx’s religious theory based on the specific characteristics of China’s actual national conditions and religions in China, and establish the religious theory system with Chinese characteristics.”^[3]

2.2 Context of “religion is the opium of the people”

(1) What is the context of the sentence, “religion is the opium of the people”? The full text goes as following. “The suffering in religion is not only the manifestation of the suffering in reality, but also the protest against the suffering in reality. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed living beings and the emotion in the ruthless world. It is the spirit of the system which does not have the spiritual vitality. Religion is the opium of the people.”^[4]

(2) Later, Lenin defined the phrase “religion is the opium of the people” as the cornerstone of all Marxist world outlooks on religion. In addition, in the early days of the founding of the People’s Republic of China, our religious policies, like economic and political policies, copied the Soviet Union model. The Collected Works of Marx and Engels in Russian was the first version of this book introduced to the Chinese academia. All these reasons led to the situation that at that time, the mainstream of scholars in our country believed that above definition was the essence of religion in Marxism.

3. The Original Meaning of “Religion is the Opium of the People”

3.1 How to understand the original meaning of Marx’s “religion is the opium of the people” scientifically and accurately

(1) In order to solve this problem, first of all, we should understand the historical background of Germany when Marx put forward this thought, and put the sentence in the specific economic and political situation, which is necessary for the restoration of history. Secondly, the important point is to put this sentence into the full text of the Introduction to Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right in the Collected Works of Marx and Engels. The context of the text should be analyzed; this is the beginning of a proper and accurate understanding of “religion is the opium of the people”. The Introduction to Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right is the opening chapter of four and ten volumes of Collected Works of Marx and Engels, and its importance has always been highly valued. Now it seems that due to the limitation of historical conditions, many scholars interpret “religion is the opium of the people” out of the context. This crude understanding is the same as the old Christendom’s understanding of the New Testament saying, “blessed are those who have not seen it”.

This phrase “religion is the opium of the people” is not first put forward by Marx. Several Germans, such as Goethe and Heine, the writers, as well as Hegel and Feuerbach, the philosophers, used similar words like “anesthesia” or “opium” to describe religion. When Marx says, “religion is the opium of the people”, the key is not the opium, but the people. The phrase “people’s religion” originated from Hegel’s *The Phenomenology of Spirit*. As a young Hegelian school scholar, Marx is familiar with Hegel’s works.

(2) Around 2000 AD, some scholars changed the expression “religion is the opium of the people” to “religion is the opium that anaesthetizes the people” and emphasized its anesthetic effect. The research and thoughts of the older generation of scholars in China are also keeping pace with the times. They are constantly thinking, renewing and deepening their own ideas. For example, in 1998, Da-ji Lv, a famous expert in religious studies in China, wrote an article, *What is religion: Essence, Basic Elements and Logical Structure of Religion* to refute the view that emphasizes the role of anesthesia. He said, “this sentence is also about the social function of religion: anesthetize the people. Opium that can anesthetize the people is not limited to religion. The boring, decadent songs, as well as indecent books and magazines, are all spiritual opium that anesthetizes the people. Obviously, the opinion is not the essential stipulation that distinguishes religion from other social and cultural forms.”^[5] This viewpoint also renews and deepens his previous ideas.

(3) For the viewpoint that “religion is the opium that anaesthetizes the people”, Xiao-wen Ye, the former Director of the National Religious Affairs Administration, also has his own unique opinion, which is more widely recognized and accepted by the academic circle. In his view, Marx’s “religion is the opium of the people” does not mainly stress the narcotic effect of opium, but the people who are anesthetized by opium. The context before this sentence is, “religion is the sigh of the oppressed living beings and the emotion in the ruthless world.”^[6] To understand the meaning of this sentence accurately, we need to analyze Chinese people’s understanding of “opium” and the connotation of “opium” in the western historical context.

3.2 The meaning of “opium” in the historical contexts of China and Germany

(1) Since we have experienced the Opium War, most of our understanding on opium is based on

our previous understanding that opium is a disaster to our country, to our people and to our hearts. So how do Germans understand opium at that time? Opium was once used as analgesic in Europe, and was unaffordable for ordinary people for its high price. Citizens had to choose religion to comfort their poor mood. This shows that the “opium” here is different from opium as a drug. “Opium of the people” here has some soothing and comforting effects. The discussion of opium here is to place it in the background of the European Christian history, while Marx’s “religion is the opium of the people” also stresses the people’s character of Christian.

(2) What was the historical environment of Germany at that time? Germany was still under the high pressure of monarchy after a long dark night in the Middle Ages. Morality, law and philosophy were still under the cover of religion and theology. People’s thoughts were imprisoned and their economic life was in poverty. So people tried to break the bondage of religion and resist political oppression. This is the historical background of the birth of the thought of Marx and Engels.

Living in such an era, Marx had his own concern and reflection on social, political, economic and religious issues. The title of his doctoral dissertation is *Comparing the Views of Democritus and Epicurus*. In his youth, Marx was deeply influenced by Bruno Bauer. He used Bruno Bauer’s philosophy of “self-consciousness” to explain Epicurus’ natural philosophy and tried to explore the significance of Epicurus’ enlightening atheism. In the Introduction to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right, we can clearly find the influence of Bruno Bauer’s thought, such as “Religious Opium” and “Religious Alienation”. For example, “religion is the opium of the people” corresponds to Bruno Bauer’s original opinion. “Religion draws a picture of the future in opium anesthesia... Through the effect of opium, human beings can sleep to achieve real or absolute rights.”^[7] The sentence, “religion is the sigh of the oppressed living beings and the emotion in the ruthless world. It is the spirit of the system which does not have the spiritual vitality” corresponds to the sentence, “Christianity is the illusion of human beings towards themselves and their mission at a specific stage... This country, this law and this view of humanity, this illusion, this empty conclusion, and this murder of universality constitute the religious consciousness.”^[7]

(3) In the Introduction to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right, Marx said at the beginning, “as far as Germany is concerned, the criticism of religion is basically over, and the criticism of religion is the premise of other criticisms.”^[4] In the historical process of interpreting Marx’s thought of “religion is the opium of the people”, the phrase “criticism of religion is the premise of all other criticisms” once played an extremely important role. The connection between the two sentences made the scholars in the 1980s firmly regard “religion is the opium of the people” as the religious essence of Marxism.

4. Scientific Use of the “Socialist Religious Outlook”

4.1 Marx demanded a new criticism from the end of religious criticism.

(1) Marx said that the criticism of German religion is over. Why we still need the religious criticism as the prerequisite of criticism? In view of that question, Dun-hua Zhao, a famous philosopher, made a brilliant statement with philosophical insight after the cross-textual interpretation of the two texts. “Marx uses his own language to summarize the religious critical views represented by Feuerbach and Bauer, but they are not the religious views he holds or endorses. German religious criticism is not the premise of Marx’s criticism. Marx calls for new criticism from the end of religious criticism.”^[7]

From interpreting the opinion, “religion is the opium of the people”, we can draw the conclusion that Marx held a critical view on religion. At the same time, the article of Introduction to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right was written during the period in which Marx and Engels’ world outlooks and the religious outlook of historical materialism began to take shape. Marx’s religious thought was later promoted by Marx and Engels in works like the Communist Manifesto. Marx’s “religion is the opium of the people” cannot be used as Marx’s definition of the essence of religion. According to Da-ji Lv’s viewpoint, the sentence shows the social function of religion. So it is one-sided and limited to view this definition as the essence of religion.

(2) On the basis of the method of comparative religious studies, Da-ji Lv, a famous religious scholar, developed a perfect theoretical system of religion. He believed that “religion is composed of a kind of social consciousness concerning superhuman and supernatural forces, and the corresponding acts of expressing beliefs and worshipping these forces. It is the social and cultural system that synthesizes and standardizes these consciousness and behaviors.”^[5]

In the academic circles of our country, the interpretation of Marx’s “religion is the opium of the people” has gone through a process from one-sided, limited understanding to comprehensive and scientific interpretation. Our interpretation of this opinion keeps pace with the times. Like our present religious policy, we have developed a scientific theoretical system of socialist religious outlook and put it into practice.

4.2 The role of scientific socialist religious outlook in contemporary era

(1) One of the most important contents of our current scientific socialist religious outlook is to correctly handle the relationship between politics and religion. In this process, we should adhere to the separation of politics and religion and the freedom of religious belief. Since the General Secretary Xi came to power, the policy of separating politics from religion has been implemented more effectively, which is in line with the new situation of China in the 21st century. It also shows that we step close to the realization of the “Chinese Dream” of the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation.

(2) In the 21st century, we are facing more complex and changeable international situations. Therefore, peace and stability in China are the top priority. As we all know, China is a multi-ethnic country composed of 56 nationalities. How to deal with the problem of minority beliefs under the guidance of the scientific connotation of Marxist religious outlook is related to the peace and harmony of our domestic situation. In addition to adhering to the principle of “separating politics from religion and freedom of belief”, we need to strengthen the supervision of the network to prevent the infiltration of reactionary separatist forces abroad.

5. Conclusion

In contemporary China, the interpretation of Marx’s opinion, “religion is the opium of the people”, has undergone a process from rational and objective understanding to comprehensive and objective interpretation. “Religion is the opium of the people” cannot be used as Marx’s definition of the essence of religion. Many scholars have provided comprehensive and scientific definitions of religion based on their own researches. All these achievements reflect the historical development of the scientific socialist religious outlook in contemporary China. At the same time, in the 21st century, with the rapid dissemination of information on the Internet, China is now facing more complex and changeable international situations. To this end, we should objectively and scientifically interpret and use the “scientific socialist religious outlook” to serve our socialist modernization construction.

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