

Table of Contents

I	1
II	2
III	4
IV	6

Socialism and Religion

Pannekoek, Anton
1907

Translated by Ernest Untermann for International Socialist Review, April 1907. From <https://www.marxists.org/archive/pannekoe/1907/socialism-religion.htm>.

I

If we try to find a key for the mutual relation of socialism and religion in the practical attitude of socialist speakers and writers and religious spokesmen, we are easily led to believe, that the greatest misunderstanding, confusion, and internal contradictions reign in this regard. On one side we see that numerous laborers, when joining the ranks of the socialists, also throw their theological faith overboard and often combat religion fiercely; moreover, the teachings, which form the basis and strength of present-day socialism, and which together form a entirely new world conception, stand irreconcilably opposed to religious faith. On the other hand, we see faithful adherents of Christianity, even priests, demanding socialism precisely on account of their Christian teachings and gathering under the banner of the labor movement. And all agitators, and, what is still more significant, all programs of international socialist parties, unanimously declare religion to be a private affair of individuals, in which others have no business to interfere. Nevertheless most priests and official representatives of religion combat the social democracy very zealously. They contend, that this movement aims merely to exterminate faith, and they harp unctuously upon all statements of our great champions Marx, Engels, Dietzgen, in which they make critical remarks about religion and defend their own materialism as a scientific doctrine. This, again, is opposed by comrades in our own ranks, who, relying upon the declaration of neutrality toward religion in our party program, would prefer to forbid the spreading of such statements, which hurt the feelings of religious people. They say that the goal of our socialist movement is purely economic. In that respect they are right, and we shall not fail to repeat this again and again in refutation of the lies of the preachers. We do not wish to inoculate people with a new faith, or an atheism, but we rather wish to bring about an economic transformation of society. We desire to displace capitalist production by a socialist one. Any one may realize the practicability of such a collective production and its advantages over capitalist exploitation, for reasons which have nothing at all to do with religion. To this end we want to secure the political power for the working class, since it is indispensable as a means to this end. The necessity, or at least the desirability, of this transfer of the political power can be understood by any laborer from his political experience, without any further ceremony, regardless of whether he is in matters of faith a Protestant, a Catholic, a Jew, or a Freethinker without any religion. Our propaganda, then, is to be exclusively devoted to the work of elucidating the economic advantages of socialism, and everything is to be eschewed, which might run counter to the prejudice of religious minds.

Evident as this conception may be, at least in its first part, yet it has its drawback, and there will be few, who will agree with the ultimate conclusion. If it were correct, and if it were our aim to preach the beauties of socialism to all people, then we should naturally have to address ourselves to all classes of society, and first of all to the most educated. But the history of socialism has thoroughly disavowed the utopian sentimentalists who wanted to do this. It was found, that the possessing classes did not care about these advantages, and that the working class became more and more accessible to this understanding. This in itself indicates that something more has to be considered than merely to prove to people the practicability of an economic transformation of society. This transformation, and its instrument, the conquest of political power by the working class, can only be the outcome of a great class-struggle. But in order to carry this class-struggle successfully to its conclusion, it is necessary to organize the whole working class, to awaken its political intelligence, to endow it with a thorough understanding of the internal forces which move the world. It is furthermore necessary to be familiar with the strength and weakness of the opponents of the working class, in order to make the best use of them, and in order to be able to meet all influences energetically, which might weaken the internal and external strength of the organized army of workers. Only a clear grasp of all political and social phenomena can preserve the present leaders and members of the socialist movement from missteps and mistakes, which might seriously injure the propaganda among the still unenlightened masses. Only profound knowledge will enable them to wrest ever new concessions from their enemies by their tactics and to benefit the working class.

If it is a fact, that the greatest amount of knowledge and understanding is required in our ranks for the purpose of waging our fight well, and if the materialistic writings of our master minds tend to increase this intelligence, then it would involve great disadvantages to try to conceal and suppress these writings and conceptions for no other reason than that of avoiding a clash with the prejudices of people of limited knowledge.

Our theory, the socialist science founded by Marx and Engels, was the first to give us clear glimpses of the different social interrelations, which influence our movement. It will, therefore, be necessary for us, to turn to this science for a satisfactory answer to the question of the relation between socialism and religion.

II

If we wish to decide upon our attitude towards religion, it will first be necessary for our science to enlighten us concerning the origin, the nature and the future of religion, and this enlightenment, like every science, must be based upon experience and facts. Now we find in all countries with a strongly developed socialist movement, that the mass of class-conscious workers are without religion, that is, they do not believe in any religious doctrines and do not adhere to any of them. This seems at first sight all the more peculiar, as this mass has generally received but little schooling. On the other hand, the "educated" classes, that is, the bourgeoisie, return more and more to faith, although there was at one time a strong anti-religious movement among them. It seems, then, that belief or unbelief are not primarily a result of culture, of a certain degree of knowledge and enlightenment. The socialist workers are the first among whom irreligion appears as a social mass phenomenon. There must be some definite cause for this, and if this does not prove to be merely a transient fact, it must necessarily result in a greater and greater restriction of the field of religion by socialism.

Now the partisans of religion contend that this is not the case, for religion, according to them, is something more and higher than a mere theological faith. The devotion to an ideal, the willingness to make sacrifices for a great cause, the faith in the final victory of the Good – all this is said to be also religion. In this sense the socialist movement must even be called deeply religious. Of course, we are not going to split hairs about words. We will merely say, therefore, that this meaning of the term religion is not the customary one. We know very well that the socialist working people are filled with a great and high idealism, but with them this is not allied to a belief in any supernatural power, which is supposed to rule the world and guide the fates of men. We use the term religion only in this last meaning, that is, as a belief in a god.

Now let us ask ourselves whence this faith comes, and what it signifies. It is obvious, that the faith in a supernatural power, which rules men and the world, can exist only to the extent that the actual forces controlling the processes in nature and in the human world are unknown. A Kaffir, who serves as porter in a South African railway station and who suddenly hears the Morse apparatus starting to give signals, believes that a god is concealed in it. He bows deeply before the apparatus and says reverently: "I will at once inform the boss" (the telegraph operator). This conception of the untutored man is quite intelligible, and so is the fact that the primitive people believed the nature around them to be filled with all sorts of mysterious spirits. In their economy they depend wholly upon nature. Many natural forces and unknown powers threaten their lives and their work, while others are favorable, useful, benefiting to them. They have no means of knowing and controlling those powers. These appear to them as supernatural, manlike, forces with independent wills, and they seek to influence them with the means of their limited mental horizon, with prayers, sacrifices, or, perhaps, threats. The little general knowledge required for their economy is intimately connected with their religious conceptions. The priests owe their great influence precisely to the fact, that they are the mental directors of production. Just as in their conception of the forces of nature elementary and crude empirical knowledge is mixed with fantastic superstition, so their religious ceremonies form a mixture of actions necessary in production and of actions wholly superstitious and useless.

Civilized people are no longer influenced so overwhelmingly by the forces of nature. Although it would not do to say, that they are scientifically understood in the beginning of civilization, yet men are more out of reach of their direct influence. Their methods of production and of labor have become so developed, that men feel more independent of natural events and are not so helpless against them as savages. When we come to a later stage of civilization, to the age of capitalism, then we meet with a rapidly developing natural science, which investigates the forces and effects of nature systematically and uncovers their secrets. By the application of this science in technique, the forces of nature are even made subject to the production of the necessities of life. For the modern civilized man, then, nature holds no more mysterious powers, which might induce him to believe in supernatural forces. These spirits of the past are tamed and pressed into his service as ordinary forces of nature, whose laws and processes are known to him.

Nevertheless we find that the class, in which this culture and this supremacy over nature are incarnated, has remained, or has again become, religious for the greater part, with the exception of a strong temporary current, of bourgeois materialism in the nineteenth century. Why is that so? What reason have they for assuming the existence of a supernatural ruler of the fates of mankind? In other words, what forces are there that still strongly affect the existence of the bourgeoisie, and that are

still unknown in their origin and nature and therefore may still be regarded by them as mysterious and natural forces? These forces are derived from the social order. The adage says, indeed, that every one is the captain of his own soul, but in practice most of the capitalists find out that this is not true.

As an independent producer, the capitalist may do his best, he may attend conscientiously and thriftily to his business, he may exploit his employees thoroughly without any sentimentality, he may keep his own expenditures within a decent limit, and nevertheless prices may fall, until he has to sell almost without any profit, or even at a loss, and in spite of his efforts the evil monster of failure creeps upon him. Or, his business may be doing well, and he may be accumulating money at a fine rate, when all of a sudden a crisis overtakes him and swallows his whole business. How does this happen? He does not know. He lacks the knowledge of political economy, which might enlighten him about the fact, that capitalism necessarily must produce such great social forces, which may lift the individual to high prosperity, if he is lucky, but which may also destroy him. The origin of these forces is to be sought in the fact that production is indeed social, but only in the form and appearance of production depending on private enterprise and control. The individual fancies that he is working independently, but he must exchange his products with others, and the conditions of exchange, the prices, and the possibility of exchanging at all, are decided by the totality of social conditions. Production is not consciously regulated by society. Its social character stands above the will of mankind, the same as the forces of nature, and for this reason social laws face the individual with the inevitability and cruel inexorableness of natural forces. The laws of this artificial nature, of this process of production, are unknown to him and for this reason he stands before them just as the savage stands before the laws of nature. They bring destruction and misery in many forms, occasionally also fortune. They rule his fate capriciously, but he does not know and understand them.

The socialist proletariat stands before these forces with a different attitude. It is precisely its oppressed condition which deprives it of all interest in the preservation of capitalism and in the concealment of the truth about this system. Thus the proletarian is enabled to study capitalism well, he is compelled to make himself thoroughly familiar with his enemy. This is the reason why the scientific analysis of capitalism given in *Capital*, which is the life's work of Karl Marx, met reluctance and little understanding on the side of the bourgeois scientists, but was hailed with enthusiastic appreciation by the proletariat. The proletarians find in this work a revelation of the causes of their poverty. By its teaching they are enabled to understand the whole history of the capitalist mode of production. They become aware of the reasons, why it must inevitably be the fate of innumerable small bourgeois to fail, why hunger, war, and the suffering incidental to crises must necessarily follow from this production. But they also see, in what manner capitalism must ruin itself by its own laws. The working class understand, why by their insight and knowledge, they will be enabled to displace capitalism by a consciously regulated social production, in which no mysterious forces can any longer bring destruction to mankind. The socialist portion of the working class, then, stands before the social forces just as intelligently and understandingly as the educated bourgeois stands before the forces of nature.

Here, then, lies the cause of the irreligion of the modern class-conscious socialist proletariat. It is not the product of any intentional anti-religious propaganda. Nor is it the demand of any program. It comes rather gradually as a consequence of the deeper social insight, which the working people acquire by instruction on the field of political economy. The proletarian is not divorced from his faith by any materialist

doctrines, but by teaching which enables him to see clearly and rationally through the conditions of society, and to the extent that he grasps the fact that social forces are natural effects of known causes, the old faith in miracles dies out in him.

III

In order to understand the nature of religion thoroughly – and only a thorough understanding will enable us to grasp its effects in present society – we must come to a clear conception of the nature of spiritual things in general. It is in this respect that the philosophical writings of Josef Dietzgen are so valuable, because they give us clearness about the nature of the mind, of human thoughts, theories, doctrines, about ideas in general. Only in this way do we fully realize our role in social life and in the present struggle. Whatever is in the mind, is a reflection of the world outside of us. It has arisen out of this world. Our conception of things true and real is derived from our experience in the world, our conception of things good and holy from our needs. But these mental reflections are not mere mirrored pictures, which reproduce the object exactly as it is, while the mind plays a purely passive role. No, the mind transforms everything, which it assimilates. Out of the impressions and feelings, by which the material world exerts an influence upon it, it makes mental conceptions and assumptions. Dietzgen has explained, that the difference between world and mind, original and copy, is this, that the infinitely varied, concrete, ever changing flow of phenomena, of which reality consists, is turned by the mind into abstract, fixed, unchangeable, rigid conceptions. In these conceptions the general, lasting, important, salient facts are detached from the multicolored picture of phenomena and designated as the nature of things. In the same way we spiritualize among the many things and institutions necessary for our welfare those by terms good, moral, holy, which are essential for satisfaction of our lasting, vital and general requirements.

It is inherent in this nature of mental concepts and assumptions, that although they are derived from reality, yet they cannot immediately follow reality in its ceaseless alterations. When a thing has once been gathered from experience as a mental copy, it becomes fixed in the mind and remains there enthroned as a recognized truth, while new experiences are crowding upon the mind, to which this truth can no longer be reconciled. At first this truth resists, but gradually it has to submit to modification, until finally, when the new facts have been accumulated in crushing masses, it is overthrown, or thoroughly understood and altered. This is the history of all scientific theories. The place of the old is taken by a new theory, which then gives to the entire store of material facts an abstract and systematic summarisation.

We are not so much interested here in the scientific theories, as in the general conceptions concerning the nature of the world and the position of man in it, which are incorporated in the philosophies and religions. These are not theories abstracted from the experiences and special observations of learned explorers. The facts on which they are built up are rather the experiences and feelings of whole nations or popular classes. They form their general ideas and conceptions out of their experience concerning their own position in nature and in social environments, particularly concerning the requirements of their life. Wherever powerful unknown forces press upon them – as we have indicated before – their conception of the world is dominated by supernatural forces, and other conceptions are joined to this fundamental thought. This was the case, until now, in almost the whole of history, with only a few exceptions. In the religious doctrines, then, we find the general primitive conceptions concerning the nature of the world and of the relations of man to those unknown forces expressed in mystified forms. Everything required for the maintenance or the interests of this class of people then assumes the form of a divine law. When all hope of

improvement by self-assertion is gone, as it was among the ruined Roman proletarians of the first centuries of Christianity, then meek suffering without resistance and inert waiting for supernatural salvation become the highest virtue. But when an energetic preparation for war is required to keep hold of a conquered country and is accomplished by success, as it was among the Jews of the Old Testament, then Jehovah helps his chosen people and those obey his laws who fight bravely. During the great class struggle in Europe, called the Reformation, every one of the classes engaged in the fight regarded as God's will whatever agreed with its class interests, for each could conceive only of those things as being absolutely good and necessary which were vital for the existence of his class. For the followers of Luther, who loved to serve a prince, God's law, or God's truth, demanded obedience to authority; for the free bourgeoisie of the towns it demanded Calvinist equality of individuals and selection by grace; for the rebellious peasants and proletarians it demanded the communist equality of all mankind. The struggling religions of that period may be compared in a general way with the political parties of the present day. The members of the same class assembled in them, and in their congresses (councils) they formed in the shape of confessions of faith (we would say programs nowadays) their general conceptions of what they thought to be true, good, and necessary, and what was consequently God's truth and God's will. In those days religion was something living, deeply and intimately connected with the whole life, and for this reason it happened continually that people changed their religion. When a change of religion is considered merely as a sort of violation of conventionality, as it is in our day, it is an indication, that religion remains untouched by the great social movement of modern times, by the struggles which stimulate men, and becomes a mere dead husk.

With the development of society new classes and new class antagonisms have arisen. Within the previously existing communities of the faithful different classes, and antagonisms resulting from them, have grown up. From the same stratum of small bourgeois, there have arisen great capitalists and proletarians. The confession of faith, which was formerly an expression of a living social conviction in a theological garb, becomes a rigid formula. The community of faithful, formerly a community of interests, becomes a fossilized thing. The mental conceptions persist by tradition as abstract theological forms, so long as they are not shaken by the strong gale of a new class struggle.

When this new class struggle comes, it finds the old traditional antagonisms in its way, and then the fight between the traditional faith and the new reality begins. The present actual class interests are identical for the working people of different religious confessions, while a deep class antagonism exists between laborers and capitalists of the same religious denomination. But the new reality requires time to overcome the old traditions. From a time, in which a religious community represented a living community of interests, the association of members of the same faith has been transmitted as a tradition, and a sacred tradition of that. Because this association is the mental image of a former reality, it persists as a spiritual fact and attempts to maintain itself against the onrush of the new facts, which influence the mind of the laborer by his own experience and by socialist propaganda. In the end the old group of conceptions and interests, which has become a dead husk, must yield to the new group based on present class interests.

Religion is, therefore, only temporarily an obstacle for the advance of socialism. By virtue of the sacredness attached to its doctrines and commands it can maintain itself longer and more tenaciously than other bourgeois conceptions, and this tenaciousness has sometimes created the impression that the faithfulness of the religious laborers would be a bar to practical and a refutation of theoretical socialism. But in

the long run even this ideology succumbs to the power of reality, as the Catholic laborers in Germany have proved.

IV

The socialist teachings have inoculated the laboring class with an entirely new conception of the world. The realization, that society is in a process of continual transformation, and that misery, poverty, exploitation, and all the suffering of the present are only temporary and will soon yield to an order of society, to be inaugurated by his class, in which peace, abundance, and fraternity shall reign, this realization must revolutionize the whole world conception of the laborer from the ground up. The theory of socialism furnishes the scientific foundation for this world conception. Political economy teaches us to understand the internal laws, which move the capitalist process, while historical materialism lays bare the effects of the economic revolution upon the conceptions and actions of people. And this stands irreconcilably opposed, as a materialistic doctrine, to religion. The socialist laborer who has recognized his class interests and has thereby been inspired with enthusiasm for the great aim of his class struggle, will then naturally desire to get a clear understanding of the scientific foundations of his practical actions. To this end he is acquainted with the materialistic doctrines of socialism. But it is not merely on account of the satisfaction derived from a thorough understanding, that is necessary for the socialist parties to promote a thorough understanding of these teachings among their members. It is necessary rather because such an understanding is indispensable for a vigorous pushing of our fight.

The actual state of affairs, then, is just the opposite of what the theologians believe and proclaim. Our materialistic doctrines do not serve to deprive the laborers of their religion. They approach our doctrines only after their religion is already gone, and they come to us for a more profound and uniform substantiation of their views. Religion does not flee, because we propagate the doctrines of materialism, but because it is undermined by the simple new gleanings on the field of economics, gathered by a careful observation of the present world.

In declaring that religion is a private matter, we do not mean to say that it is immaterial to us, what general conceptions our members hold. We prefer a thorough scientific understanding to an unscientific religious faith. But we are convinced, that the new conditions will of themselves alter the religious conceptions, and that religious or anti-religious propaganda is unable to accomplish or prevent this.

Here lies the crux of the difference between our conception and all former ones, between the present proletarian movement and former class movements. Our materialistic theory has uncovered for us the actual foundations of former historical struggles. It has demonstrated, that it was always a question of class-struggles and class interests whose goal was the transformation of economic conditions. Men were not clearly aware of the material reasons for their struggles. Their conceptions and aims were disguised by a mystic cover of eternal truths and holy infinite aims. Their struggles were therefore carried on as struggles between ideas, as struggles for divine truth in fulfilment of God's will. The struggles assumed the shape of religious wars. Later, when religion no longer occupied first place, when the bourgeoisie, fancying that they could grasp the whole world by reason, fought against the representatives of the church and nobility, then this bourgeoisie imagined that they were waging a fight for the ultimate rational, for eternal justice based upon reason. At that period the bourgeoisie championed materialism. But as yet they understood but little of the real nature of the struggle, and carried it on in that juristic mystification,

here and there as a struggle against religion. They did not see, that this fight was nothing but a class struggle of the bourgeoisie against the feudal classes, and had for its aim only the installation of the capitalist mode of production.

In this respect our class struggle is different from all previous ones, for by virtue of our materialist science we recognize it to be exactly what it is, namely, a struggle for the economic transformation of society. Although we feel the high importance of this struggle, and often express it in our writings, that it shall bring freedom and brotherhood to mankind, realize the Christian ideals of human love, and emancipate human thought from the oppression of superstition, nevertheless we do not represent this struggle as an ethical one for a moral ideal, as a juristic one for absolute liberty and justice, or as a spiritual one against superstition. For we know, that it is waged in reality for the revolution of the mode of production, for the requirements of production, and all other things are but results flowing from this basis.

This clear grasp of the real nature of our struggle is expressed in the declaration that religion is a private matter. There is no contradiction between our materialist doctrine and this practical demand. They do not represent two antagonistic points of view, which must be reconciled, in the way that "considerations of practicability" must be reconciled with "soundness of theoretical principle." No, just as our so-called considerations of practicability are everywhere results of a clearly understood theory, so it is here, as the above statements show. The declaration that religion is a private matter is therefore an expression of the clearly scientific nature and aim of our struggle, a necessary consequence of our materialist theory of history, and only our materialism is able to give a scientific vindication of this demand.