

Some Questions on Ethics, Religion and Politics

[This is my response to some questions from a revolutionary correspondent in Pakistan on Dec. 19, 2008. –S.H.]

Dear -----,

First of all my best wishes to you and other revolutionaries in Pakistan! I know conditions for political work there are often very difficult and dangerous. I have the greatest admiration for those who are willing to take the risks that are necessary in order to change the world for the better.

You wrote:

- > I have seen somewhere that “morality is a code of human values which consist the
- > deepest substance of the judgments of individual and society towards each other”
- > and “morality will bring freedom from the fetters of oppression and injustice.”
- > Is this a correct definition of morality? If not, why and how we can refute it
- > through a Marxist explanation?

I think the first part of the definition of morality you quote here is roughly correct but tends to be misleading in certain ways because of its abstractness. For example what is meant by “human values”? Different people, and different classes, have widely different ideas about just what human values are. Thus, for the capitalists, “free enterprise”—the right to run a business which exploits workers—is a “human value”. And of course for us the right to live our lives without being exploited and oppressed is a human value. But if it is understood that different classes make different judgments about human values then the definition is much more correct.

The statement that “morality will bring freedom from the fetters of oppression and injustice” is more clearly in error, unless “morality” is construed very broadly to include revolutionary struggle, etc. Liberals often argue that actual struggle (let alone armed struggle) is neither necessary nor moral. They claim that it is sufficient merely to teach people morality, and to convince those who mistreat others through polite argument about what is actually right or wrong. But of course that approach does not generally work in this vicious capitalist-imperialist world of ours.

The people do not get to choose which means will be necessary to get the capitalists and their armed agents off our backs. The necessary means are determined for us by the enemy. If the enemy ignores or laughs at our requests and demands that they cease their vicious exploitation and oppression (as they almost always do), then we must go beyond mere requests or demands and use physical force against them.

Of course this use of physical force against the enemies of the people is itself moral from our point of

view, since for us morality is a matter of what is in the genuine interests of the people. And it is certainly in the interests of the people to get the oppressors off their backs, and to eliminate the entire system of oppression, by whatever means are necessary.

- > What is the relationship between religion and morality? How Marxists should
- > tackle the issue to prove that religion is NOT the origin of morality?

This is a major issue in the world as it is today, with so many people everywhere indoctrinated with religion. I think some of the things we need to do to break down this actually quite absurd idea that religion is the source of morality are:

1) Point out many examples where religions actually promote things which are definitely wrong. The fact that historically all religions have been quite willing to kill people who have not agreed with their ideas is one good example of this. Religion has been one of the major sources of murder in the world.

2) Point out many examples where religions do *not* oppose other things which are actually very wrong. All the major religions of the world have—at least at some point in their history—not opposed slavery for example. And none of them oppose capitalist-imperialist exploitation and oppression today. And even today none of them fully support equal rights for women.

3) Point out that often the most moral people in a society are those without any religion. There have been many very selfless and wonderful individuals who have devoted their lives to serving the people. Many communists of course, but other atheists too, such as many who have become medical doctors.

4) One good way of getting people to recognize the points above is to first talk about other societies where different religions dominate. Thus to weaken the idea that religion is the source of morality in the U.S., where most of the religious people are Christians, it might be useful to point out how Hindus have often murdered Muslims in India, and justified this on the basis of their religion. Or about how Buddhists in Sri Lanka have used their religion to justify the murder of Hindu Tamils. If people can first be brought to admit that in a great many other places in the world religion has actually served not morality, but actually immorality, this might break down their resistance to admitting the same thing in their own society and with regard to the particular religion they themselves were brought up to believe in.

5) The very fact that there have been all these religious wars in history, even between sects within the same overall religion—such as the Hundred Years War in Europe between Roman Catholics and Protestants (which actually lasted about 130 years!)—should also raise serious questions in the minds of people about the supposed promotion of morality by religions.

6) Then there is the fact that in every part of the world established religions promote the rulers and their system against the interests of those who are ruled. In the case of Christianity, for example, the Bible tells believers to “render unto Caesar that which is Caesar’s”—or in other words not to resist things like taxes, even if they are totally unjust, and not to resist the rulers in general. Lenin pointed out that the ruling class rules by means of “the gendarme and the priest”, that is through force and through ideas—many of which are supposedly justified by religions. It is important to expose this actual social role of religions

throughout all of history.

7) And finally, if we can explain to people the *actual* source of genuine morality—as deriving from the common, collective interests of groups of people—we can undercut the religious explanation for the supposed source of morality as the edicts of God, or whatever is said in some holy book.

In reality there seems to me to be no real connection between morality and religion whatsoever—except that because people have not scientifically understood the true source of morality as arising from their own collective needs and interests, they have been fooled into thinking that the source must be in their religion, and ultimately in Heavenly dictates!

- > Is it right for Marxists to claim that “truth” in connection with social
- > sciences should be sought in Marx to Mao’s works as they represent a scientific
- > ideology?

Well, I would put it a little differently. All matters of fact and truth in the world are to be settled by scientific investigation. A major start toward this in the sphere of social science was accomplished by Marx, Engels, Lenin and Mao, and to lesser extents by their comrades and followers. These great individuals did discover many truths, and did create the foundations of our revolutionary social science.

But something is not certainly true just because Marx or Mao said it was true. I think we need to uphold the same standards as are used in other sciences. In physics, for example, we have great respect for Galileo, Newton and Einstein, and we recognize that these individuals (along with many others of lesser stature) created and developed the science of physics. But we also recognize that physics still has unresolved questions, and that even some of the things that Galileo, Newton and Einstein said might actually be wrong. Indeed some of things that Einstein said corrected some errors in Newton. There are now some good reasons to believe that Einstein’s theories cannot be totally correct in all situations either. (Relativity theory seems to break down in dealing with Black Holes, for example.)

Similarly, biology has its primary foundation in Darwin’s works. But as great as our respect for Darwin will always be, biological science has developed tremendously since his day, and will certainly continue to develop in the future. And we have to view our revolutionary science, which we generally call Marxism-Leninism-Maoism today, after the three most prominent developers of that science, in the same way.

There are two serious, but opposite, dangers here: 1) To view whatever Marx, Lenin, Mao, or other prominent revolutionaries have said as “necessarily true”. That is just not the scientific approach. But also 2) To fail to treat the important discoveries of these founders of our science as its continuing basis, or to throw out specific principles that they developed without having good scientific reasons for doing so. So the two oppose errors here are called dogmatism and revisionism. (The name “revisionism” is actually not a very good one, since every science does need to be *continually revised* in light of new experience and discoveries. But for us revisionism means the *UNJUSTIFIED* revision of scientific Marxism in ways which are known to be incorrect and unscientific.)

Overall in the history of our world revolutionary movement so far, revisionism has proven to be the bigger danger. But unfortunately, especially within our overall anti-revisionist movement, there has also tended to be considerable dogmatism, and even the tendency to treat MLM not as a science, but actually rather more like a religion itself! This has even led to some revolutionary leaders being treated as almost infallible (like the Pope!), and for personality cults to be built up around them. Both Stalin and Mao themselves have to be criticized for permitting and even encouraging this sort of thing. And now we have similar situations for small parties (like the RCP in the U.S.) which have not even been able to demonstrate enough correctness to lead successful revolutions. This is all quite pathetic, and anti-scientific.

In sum, we have to constantly guard against *both* revisionism and dogmatism, and do our best to maintain MLM as a genuinely revolutionary science.

Red salute!

Scott