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Essay on religion by  
Lenin

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**ESSAY**  
ON  
**RELIGION**  
BY  
**LENIN**

WITH AN INTRODUCTION  
BY

**Chopal Paranjape**

EDITOR "NAI DUNIYA"

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## EDITOR'S NOTE.



After the failure of the *Coup* of June 3rd 1907, the Workers' movement in Russia grew weaker from year to year, in 1907 there were 700,000 registered strikers as against 1,108,000 in 1906 and 2,863,000 in 1905, while in 1908 there were only 176,000 and in 1909 64,000. The proletariat seemed to be crushed for a long time to come. From that time up to the revival of the workers' movement in 1912 reaction ruled everywhere.

In the elections to the Duma in the same year various parties contested and got elected. There were a few Bolsheviks as well. On the other hand the check given to the revolutionary movement cast disillusion everywhere. Talented writers and serious thinkers revived idealist philosophy. Former Social Democrats destroying what they had once destroyed preached a return to religion, if not the established Church. Even Maxim Gorky! and Lunacharsky preached a religion without God which was none the less a withdrawal from Materialism. "God is all that is human in the supreme power..... Let us worship the energies of humanity" wrote Lunacharsky.

Plekhanov made a bitter attack on them, Lenin followed with his refutation in a Book form— "Materialism and Empirio-criticism." Yet the question of the Social-Democratic attitude towards this revival of religious thought demanded clarification.

And this essay was occasioned by the preliminary debate on the speech to be made in the Duma when

the discussion on the Budget of the Holy Synod was opened. The Draft Speech of Surkov, the spokesman, contained a passage which clearly stated that they were atheists. Some speakers objected to this statement on the ground that such declaration would be detrimental to propaganda work.

So to avoid all conflict and give a correct lead this essay was written in Paris by Lenin.

## INTRODUCTION.

The Socialist Literature Publishing Company is publishing the essay by Lenin expressing his views on the problem 'How to eradicate religion?' I am asked to introduce this work by Com. Lenin to the Indian public in general and socialist in particular.

In India the problem of eradicating religion is of special importance. India has been a country of religious polemics for centuries. What is more is that the religious bickerings in India have grown these days and particularly under the Domination of the British Imperialism to such an extent that we are confronted periodically by communal riots at every crossing. The mosques and temples form generally the vanguard of the communal riots. Thus religion in India, though by bourgeois thinkers is raised to the realm of abstraction forms the shield to save the Imperialist and Colonial bourgeoisie. Further more it acts as a curtain which hides class-struggle.

For this reason it is an important problem before the Anti—Imperialist movement in India—How to fight religion and eradicate it.

Leninism is the only correct and scientific (because based on allembicing dialectic materialism of Marx) theory of the World Anti-Imperialist Movement.

Leninism is the only correct method of fighting all forms of Imperialist cum capitalist domination.



The public in general and the socialist will I hope come to hold this view all the more reading this essay by Lenin.

Comrade Roy recently in a Hindi paper describing Marxism said that it is a principle which is always developing. As regards Indian Marxists he criticised them for being 'parrot like crammers of certain Marxist catchphrases'. He rather criticised them for what Lenin called 'ossifying' Marxism, for their dogmatism and so on. Comparing Europe and India he pointed out that Marxism formed an essential part of European ideology, while in India it is not so. Explaining the reason for this he points out that Marx directed the limelight of his theories on all old thinking and this is the reason why Marxism forms an essential ingredient of European thinking. Similarly he asks Indian marxists to explain all old Indian ideas in the light of Marxism and he considers this their main task. But what does the whole come to? The concrete struggle of the proletariat against the bourgeoisie is left in the background, is neglected and this is said to be the task of the Indian Marxists.

No Marxist Leninist considers the struggle of the socialists on the ideological front as negligible. Educational books, throwing Marxist light on Indian outlook by examining Indian thought of old, are neither harmful nor superfluous. But writing such books and discussing such topics in the abstract alone is surely not our main task. This is pure scholasticism such educational propaganda should indeed be 'subordinated' to the *fundamental task, which is to develop a class struggle of the exploited masses against the exploiters* as Lenin remarks.



All marxists and Leninists know the importance of the theoretical struggle but they do not lose sight of the two main forms of struggle *i. e.* the economic and the political struggle against the capitalist Imperialist domination.

As early as 1874 Engels in his introduction to the Peasant War in Germany pointed out the strength and invincibility of the German Labour Movement in the concentric attack—in the struggle 'being so conducted that its three sides, the theoretical, the political, and the practical economic (resistance to the capitalists), form one harmonious and well planned entity'

As early as 1902 in 'What is to be Done?' Lenin pointed out the necessity of the theoretical struggle. But Marx, Engels and Lenin were far far away from scholasticism

This essay by Lenin clearly throws light on the relative importance of the theoretical and the practical struggle as well. It also lays down the scientific view on religion and eradicating it.

Since the problem of eradicating religion in particular and the question of theoretical struggle and its relationship with the practical struggle forms a fundamental point at issue at the present juncture I feel greatest pleasure in introducing this essay by Lenin which embodies the most scientific view on these questions.

## ESSAY ON RELIGION

The speech delivered in the Duma by deputy Surkov during the debate on the estimates of the Holy Synod, and the discussion of our Duma fraction on the draft of this speech, raised a question of extreme importance, particularly at the present time. Interest in all questions connected with religion has been aroused among wide circles of "society," among the ranks of the intellectuals who stand close to the Labour movement, and also among certain sections of the workers. The Social-Democrats are therefore obliged to explain their attitude towards religion.

The philosophy of Social-Democracy is based on scientific socialism, *i. e.*, on marxism. As marx and Engels frequently declared, the philosophic basis of Marxism is dialectical materialism, which has absorbed the historical traditions of eighteenth century French materialism, and of Feuerbach in Germany (first half of the nineteenth century)—a materialism which is absolutely atheistic and strongly hostile to all religion. Let us remember that the whole of Engel's *Anti-Dühring*, the manuscript of which was read by Marx, convicts the materialist and atheist Dühring of inconsistency in his Materialism, which leaves many loopholes open for religion and religious philosophy.

Let us remember, too that in his work on Ludwig Feuerbach, Engels reproaches the latter with having fought against religion not in order to destroy it, but in order to revive it, to create a new "higher" religion etc. "Religion is the opium of the people," said Marx, and this thought is the corner-stone of the whole Marxian philosophy on the question of religion.

Marxism regards all modern religions and churches, all religious organisations as organs of bourgeois reaction, serving to drug the minds of the working class and to perpetuate their exploitation.

At the same time, however, Engels frequently condemned those who, desiring to be more "left" or more "revolutionary" than Social-Democracy, attempted to introduce into the programme of the workers' party a direct profession of atheism in the sense of declaring war on religion. In 1874, speaking of the celebrated manifesto issued by the Blanquist refugees from the Commune, who were living in exile in London Engels described their clamorous declaration of war upon religion as stupid and stated that it would be the best means of reviving religion and retarding its death. Engels accused the Blanquists of failing to understand that only the class struggle of the workers, by drawing the masses into class conscious revolutionary, practical work, can really liberate the oppressed masses from the yoke of religion; to proclaim war on religion as a political task of the workers' party is merely to give utterance to anarchist phrases. In 1877, in his *Anti-Dühring*, Engels ruthlessly criticised the slightest concession that Dühring made to idealism and religion, and with equal ruthlessness condemned his pseudo-revolutionary idea of suppressing religion in socialist society, "To declare such a war on religion," said Engels, "is to out-Bismarck Bismarck, *i. e.*, to repeat the stupid struggle conducted by Bismarck against the clericals (Bismarck's notorious *kulturkampf* in the '70's of the last century against the German Catholic Centre Party, by means of police persecution of Catholicism). By this war, Bismarck only succeeded in strengthening the position of militant Catholicism and in damaging the cause of "real culture," for he emphasised religious instead of politi

-cal divisions and thereby diverted the attention of certain working class and democratic elements from the immediate tasks of the revolutionary, class struggle to the most superficial and false bourgeois anti-clericalism. Engels charged Duhing, who desired to appear ultra-revolutionary with wishing to repeat the stupid tactics of Bismarck, and called upon the workers' party to devote its attention to organising and enlightening the proletariat as a much better method of attacking religion than an adventurous political war against religion. This point of view was adopted by the German Social-Democrats who, for example, were in favour of allowing the Jesuits to reside in Germany and of repealing all police measures directed against religion. The celebrated point in the Erfurt programme (1891) which declared that "religion was a private matter," decided the political tactics of Social-Democracy on this point,

These tactics having become a matter of routine are now giving rise to a new distortion of Marxism in the very opposite direction, in the direction of opportunism. The principles of the Erfurt programme are now being interpreted by some to mean that Social Democracy, our party, regarding religion as a private matter, religion is therefore a private matter for us as Social-Democrats, as a party.

While he did not directly attack those who advocated this opportunist view, Engels in 1890 thought it necessary to oppose them not in a polemical but in a positive form. This he did in a declaration in which he emphatically pointed out that Social-Democracy regards religion as a private matter in so far as the state is concerned, but not in so far as it concerns Marxism or the workers' party.



This is the outside history of Marx's and Engels' statements on the question of religion. To those who adopt a careless attitude towards Marxism, to those who are unable or do not desire to think, it will appear a mass of senseless contradictions and vacillations; they will say that it is a mixture of "consistent" atheism and "connivance" at religion, that it wavers, devoid of all principle, between r-r-revolutionary war against god and a cowardly desire to "pander" to the religious workers, from fear of scaring them away, etc. In the literature of the anarchist phrasemongers numerous outbursts against Marxism in this style can be found.

Those however who are at all capable of treating Marxism seriously and of pondering over its philosophical principles and the experience of international Social-Democracy, will see that the tactics of Marxism towards religion were thoroughly consistent and were carefully thought out by Marx and Engels; and that what ignoramuses and the dilettanti regard as wavering is the direct and inevitable deduction from dialectical materialism. It would be a profound error to explain the apparent "moderation" of Marxism on the question of religion by so-called tactical consideration and the desire not to scare people away etc. On the contrary, the Marxist political line of conduct on this question is directly connected with its philosophic principles.

Marxism is materialism. As such it is as ruthlessly hostile to religion as was the materialism of the Encyclopedists of the eighteenth century or of Feuerbach. This is incontestable. But the dialectical materialism of Marx and Engels goes further than that of the Encyclopedists and Feuerbach in that it applies the materialist philosophy to history and

Social science. We must combat religion. That is the ABC of all materialism and consequently of Marxism. But Marxism is not materialism that has stopped at the ABC. Marxism goes further. It says: we must combat religion and to enable us to do that we must explain the sources of the faith and religion of the masses from the materialist point of view. The fight against religion must not be confined to abstract preaching. The fight must be linked up with the concrete practical class movement directed towards eradicating the social roots of religion. Why do the backward sections of the urban proletariat, the majority of the semi-proletariat and the masses of the peasantry cling to religion? Because the people are ignorant, say the bourgeois progressives, the radical or bourgeois materialists. Consequently: Down with religion, long live atheism, to spread atheist views is our main task. The Marxist says: That is not true; such a view is superficial, expressing a narrow bourgeois scholasticism. It is not sufficiently profound, it is not materialist; it is an idealist interpretation of the roots of religion. In modern capitalist societies the roots of religion are principally social. The roots of religion to-day are to be found in the social oppression of the masses, in their apparently complete helplessness in face of the blind forces of capitalism which every day and every hour cause a thousand times more horrible pain and suffering to the workers than any disaster like war, earthquakes etc. "Fear created the gods." Fear of the blind forces of capitalism, blind because they cannot be foreseen by the masses of the people, forces which at every step in the lives of the proletariat and the small traders threaten to bring and do bring "sudden," "unexpected," "accidental," disaster and ruin, converting them into beggars, paupers, or prostitutes,

and condemn them to starvation ; these are the roots of modern religion which the materialist, if he desires to remain a materialist, if he desires to remain a materialist, must recognise. No educational books will obliterate religion from the minds of those condemned to the hard labour of capitalism, until they themselves learn to fight in a united organised, systematic and conscians manner the roots of religion, the domination of capital in all its forms.

Does this mean that educational books against religion are harmful or superfluous? Not in the least. But it does mean that the Anti-religious propaganda of Social Democrats must be subordinated to their fundamental task, which is to develop a class struggle of the exploited masses against the exploiters.

Those who have not studied the principles of dialectical materialism, *i e*, the philosophy of Marx and Engels, may not understand (or at all events may not understand immediately) this position. What! Subordinate ideological propaganda, the propaganda of certain ideas, the fight against religion—that age-long enemy of culture and progress—to the class struggle, *i.e.* for definite practical aims in the sphere of economics and politics?

But this objection is just one of the many fashionable objections that are raised against Marxism which reveal a complete lack of understanding of Marxian dialectics. The contradictions which trouble those who raise objections of this sort are the contradictions that occur in life, *i.e.*, they are dialectical, not verbal, not imaginary contradictions. To raise an impassable barrier between the theoretical propaganda of atheism, *i. e.*, the destruction of the religious faith of certain sections of the proletariat, and the successes, the progress and the conditions of their class struggle is not dialectical reasoning, but the violent



and absolute separation of that which is indissolubly connected in living reality. We will give an example. The workers in a certain district and in a certain branch of industry are divided, we will assume, into a progressive section of class conscious Social-Democrats, who are, of course, atheists, and a rather backward section, which still maintains contact with the rural districts and the peasantry, which believes in God, goes to church and is perhaps under the direct influence of the local priest, who, we will also assume, has organised a Christian Labour Union. Let us assume further that the economic struggle in this district has led to a strike. The duty of the Marxist is to place the success of this strike in the forefront and to prevent the workers in the struggle from being split up into atheists and Christians. Atheist propaganda in such circumstances may be superfluous and even harmful, not from vulgar point of view of frightening away the backward workers of losing a seat at the elections etc., but from the point of view of the real progress of the class struggle, which in the condition of present day capitalist society will lead the Christian workers to Social-Democracy and atheism a hundred times more effectively than bare atheist propaganda. In the conditions described above an atheist preacher would simply play into the hands of the priests who desire nothing more than that the division among the workers as between strikers and blacklegs should be substituted by a division between atheists and Christians. The anarchist preaching irreconcilable war against God would, in such conditions, actually be helping the priests and the bourgeoisie (as indeed the anarchists always help the bourgeoisie). A Marxist must be a materialist, that is an enemy of religion, but from the materialist and dialectical standpoint *i. e.*, he must conceive the fight against religion

not as an abstraction, not on the basis of pure theoretical atheism, equally applicable to all times and conditions, but concretely, on the basis of the class struggle which is actually going on and which will train and educate the masses better than anything else. A Marxist should take into consideration all the concrete circumstances, should always be able to see the dividing line between anarchism and opportunism (this dividing line is relative, flexible, changeable but it exists), should take care not to fall into the abstract, verbal, empty "revolutionarism" of the anarchist, or into the vulgar opportunism of the petty bourgeois or Liberal intellectual who shrinks from the fight against religion, who evades this task who reconciles himself with the belief in God, who is guided not by the interests of the class struggle, but by the petty pitiful fear of offending, repelling or scaring off others, by the wise precept "Live and let live," etc

All other questions that rise in connection with the attitude of Social-Democrats toward religion should be decided from the point of view outlined above. For example, it is frequently asked whether a clergyman may join the Social-Democratic Party, and usually this question is answered in the affirmative, without any reservations, and reference is made to the practice of Social-Democratic Parties in Europe. This practice arose as a result not only of the application of Marxist doctrines to the Labour Movement, but also of the special historical conditions in the west which do not exist in Russia. (We shall refer to this later on.) Consequently, an affirmative reply would not be correct. We cannot say once and for all that a clergyman cannot, in any circumstances, become a member of the Social-Democratic Party. But on the other hand, we cannot make so positive a reply to the contrary. If a clergyman wishes to join us in politi-

cal work, conscientiously carries out party work, and does not infringe the Party programme, then he may be accepted into the ranks of Social-Democracy, for the contradiction between the spirit and principles of our programme and the religious convictions of the clergyman may in the circumstances, remain a matter that concerns him alone. A political organisation cannot undertake to examine all its members to see whether there is any contradiction between their views and the programme of the party. But of course such a case is very rare even in Europe, and in Russia is scarcely probable. If on the other hand the clergyman joined the Social-Democratic Party and concerned himself mainly with preaching his religious ideas, then, of course, he would have to be expelled. We must not only admit, we must do everything possible to attract workers who retain their belief in God into the Social-Democratic Party. We are resolutely opposed to offending but we attract them to our Party in order to allow them to fight against it. We permit freedom of opinion inside the Party, but within certain limits defined by the freedom of forming groups. We are not obliged to go hand in hand with those who advocate views rejected by the majority of the of the party.

Take another example. Can we in any conditions equally condemn members of Social-Democratic Party who say: "Socialism is my religion," and who advocate views corresponding to this declaration? No! Undoubtedly such a declaration is a departure from Marxism (and consequently from socialism) but the significance of this departure, its weight so to speak, varies according to circumstances. It is one thing when an agitator speaking to a working class audience uses this expression in order to make himself better understood, as a starting point for the elucidation of

his views, adapting his terms to the standard of intelligence of his audience. It is quite another thing, however, for a writer to advocate "God creation" or "God creating Socialism" (like Lunacharsky and Co.). To condemn the man in the first instance would be petty, would restrict the liberty of the agitator in the employment of his "educational" methods. In the latter example, however the Party's condemnation is absolutely necessary. For the first formula, "Socialism is religion," is a form of transition from religion to socialism; for the second it is transition from socialism to religion.

Let us now examine the conditions which gave rise in the west to the opportunist interpretation of the thesis: "Religion is a private matter." Here, of course, we have the influence of the causes which gave rise to opportunism generally, the sacrifice of the fundamental interests of the Labour movement for the sake of momentary advantage. The party of the proletariat demands from the state a declaration that religion is a private matter, but it does not by any means regard the question of fighting against this opiate of the people, of fighting religious superstition etc., "as a private matter." The opportunists misinterpret the position and make it appear that the Social-Democratic Party regards religion as a private matter.

But in addition to the usual opportunist distortions which our Duma fraction totally failed to explain



in their speeches on religion), special historical conditions have given rise to the complete indifference of European Social-Democrats today towards the question of religion. These conditions are twofold. First, the anti-religious fight is the historical task of the revolutionary bourgeoisie, and the democratic bourgeoisie in the west fulfilled this task to a considerable extent during their revolutions or in their attacks on feudalism and mediævalism. Both France and Germany have their traditions of bourgeois war on religion, begun long before the ideas of socialism arose (the Encyclopædists, Feuerbach). In Russia, owing to the special conditions of the bourgeois democratic revolution, this task falls almost wholly upon the shoulders of the working class. Petty bourgeois (Narodnik) democrats has not done too much in this respect (as the newly arisen Black Hundred Cadets or Cadet Black Hundreds of the *Vekhi* believe) but far too little as compared with Europe.

On the other hand, the Anarchists, who, as Marxists have repeatedly pointed out, adopt the bourgeois philosophy in spite of the violence with which they attack the bourgeoisie, have managed to give a specifically bourgeois interpretation to the traditions of the bourgeois war against religion. The anarchists and Blanquists in the Latin countries, Johann Most (who by the by was a pupil of Duhring) and others in Germany, the Anarchists of the '80's in Austria, have carr-

ied revolutionary phrases in the war against religion to the very extreme. This is explicable and to a certain extent legitimate, but the Russian Social-Democrats should not lose sight of the historical conditions in the west which brought this about.

Socondly, after the national bourgeois revolutions in the west had come to an end, after freedom of religion had been introduced more or less completely, the question of a democratic struggle against religion was forced into the background by the fight between bourgeois democracy and socialism, to such an extent that the bourgeois governments deliberately tried to distract the attention of the masses from socialism by organising a quasi-Liberal "campaign" against clericalism. This was the essence of the *Kulturkampf* in Germany and the bourgeois republican war against religion among western Social-Democrats was preceded by bourgeois anti-clericalism, used as a means for distracting the attention of the workers from socialism. This, too is explicable and legitimate, for the Social-Democrats were obliged to advocate the subordination of the fight against religion to the fight for socialism, in opposition to bourgeois and Bismarckian anti-clericalism.

Conditions in Russia are altogether different. The proletariat is the leader of the bourgeois democratic revolution. The party of the proletariat must be the intellectual leader in the struggle against all forms of mediaevalism, including the old official religion and all attempts to revive or reconstruct it on

other lines. Engels commented with comparative mildness on the opportunism for the German Social-Democrats who substituted the workers' party's demand that the state shall declare religion a private matter by a declaration that religion was a private matter for each Social-Democrat and for the Social-Democratic Party; by it is quite clear that the adoption of this German misrepresentation by Russian opportunists deserves to be condemned a hundred times more severely.

Our fraction acted quite correctly in declaring from the tribune of the Duma that religion is an opiate for the people, and thereby created a precedent which must serve as the basis for the speeches of all Russian Social-Democrats on the question of religion. Should our deputy have gone further and developed atheistic ideas in greater detail? We think not. This might have exaggerated the significance of the fight which the party of the proletariat in carrying on against religion; it might have obliterated the dividing line between the bourgeois and socialist fight against religion. The first thing to be done by the Social-Democratic fraction in the Black Hundred Duma was done and done well.

The second thing, which perhaps is the most important for Social-Democrats—to explain to the masses the class role of the church and clergy in supporting the Black Hundred Government and the bourgeoisie in their fight against the working class was also done very well. Much can still be said on this subject, and in the subsequent speeches Social-Democrats will find material to supplement the speech of Comrade Surkov. Nevertheless, that speech was excellent and should be printed and distributed to all our Party organisation.



The third thing is to explain in detail the correct meaning of the statement so frequently misinterpreted by the German opportunists, namely, "Religion" is a private matter.' Unfortunately Comrade Surkov did not do this. This is the more regrettable because in the earlier work of the fraction Comrade Belusov made a mistake on this question, which was pointed out at the time in *Proletarii*. The debate in the fraction shows that the dispute about atheism eclipsed the question of the proper interpretation of the famous demand that religion be declared a private matter. We will not blame Comrade Surkov for a mistake that made by the whole fraction. Nay, we admit quite frankly that the whole party is responsible for this mistake in so far as it did not sufficiently explain the question and impress upon the minds of Social Democrats the significance of Engels's remarks concerning the German opportunists. The debate in the fraction shows that the mistake made was due to the failure to understand the question and by no means to any lack of respect for the doctrines of Marx; we are sure that the mistake will be rectified in the future work of the fractions.

We repeat that on the whole Comrade Surkov's speech was an excellent one and must be printed and distributed among the Party organisations. In discussing the speech, this fraction showed that it is conscientiously fulfilling its Social-Democratic duty. It is hoped that correspondence concerning the discussions within the fraction should appear more frequently in the Party press in order that the fraction may be brought into closer contact with the Party, that the Party may know of the difficult internal work that is being carried on by the fraction, that ideological unity may be maintained in the activities of the Party and the fraction.

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