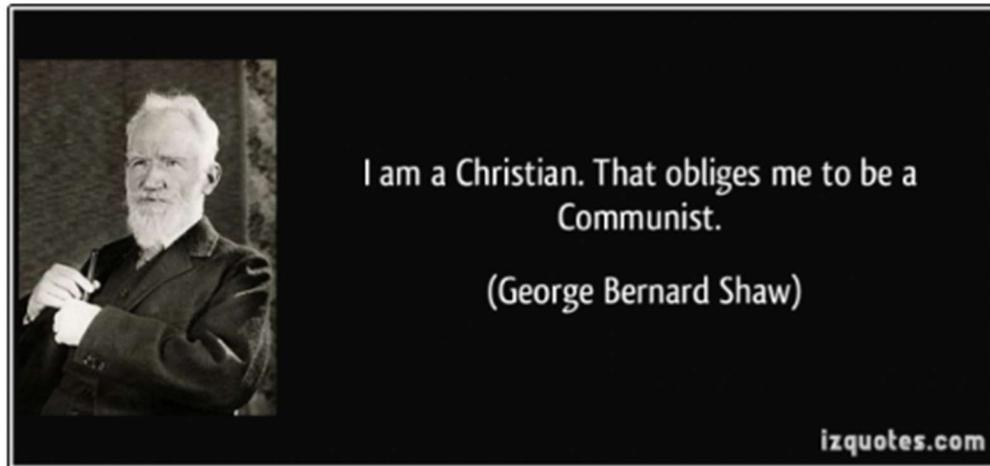


Communism, Religion and Atheism

Roland Boer

Professor Roland Boer continues his series with a discussion of religion and membership of communist parties.



Is it possible to join a communist party as a religious person? The answer, we would expect, is 'no'. After all, Marxism is a materialist philosophy and political movement, with no time for the mystifying effects of religion or for reactionary religious institutions. The problem is that communist parties in different parts of the world have often permitted religiously committed people to become members.

Let us go back to the First International (or International Workingmen's Organisation). Founded in 1864 from a diverse array of left-wing movements, Karl Marx soon became its leader and it took a clear communist direction. On the one side, it was accused by the reactionary right and indeed by former comrades of requiring atheism for its members. On the other side, the anarchists wanted the International to declare itself atheist, abolish cults and replace faith with science. What was the response of Marx and Engels? While Marx asserted that he was an atheist, he made it quite clear that the International itself did not make atheism a prerequisite for membership – 'As if one could declare by royal decree abolition of faith!' As for Engels, he repeatedly pointed out that anyone who suggests that the International 'wants to make atheism compulsory' is simply guilty of a lie.

What are the reasons for this position? The first reason was that they saw religion as a secondary phenomenon, arising from alienated socio-economic conditions. Any direct attack on religion would divert the movement from its main task. Second, 'atheism, as the *mere* negation of, and referring only to, religion, would itself be nothing without it and is thus itself another religion'. The third reason is that they would simply be copying bourgeois anti-religious

programs, which would – and this is the fourth reason – split the workers from the prime task of overcoming socio-economic oppression.

The Second International (1889-1916) took an even more explicit position. It followed the Erfurt Program of 1891, of the German Social-Democratic Party: ‘Declaration that religion is a private matter [*Erklärung der Religion zur Privatsache*]’. A key question debated at the time was whether a priest or minister could join the party: the answer was yes, but if the minister found the party program conflicted with his own positions, then that was a matter for him to resolve.

Even the far Left that became the Spartacus Group in Germany held to this position. For example, Rosa Luxemburg asserted in *Socialism and the Churches* from 1905:

The Social-Democrats, those of the whole world and of our own country, regard conscience [*Gewissen*] and personal opinion [*Überzeugung*] as being sacred. Everyone is free to hold whatever faith and whatever opinions will ensure his happiness. No one has the right to persecute or to attack the particular religious opinion of others. Thus say the Social-Democrats.

What about Lenin and the Bolsheviks? Did they demand atheism from party members? Not so, for Lenin took the position of the *Erfurt Program*. To be sure, Lenin argued for a radical separation of church and state, and that the party must not leave religion alone in propagating its position – so that religion was also very much a public affair. Yet this did not lead Lenin to propose that party membership applications should include a question on religion and atheism. Even though a socialist may espouse a materialist worldview in which religion is but a medieval mildew, even though the party may undertake a very public and unhindered program of education against the influence of the church, and even though one hoped that the historical materialist position would persuade all of its truth, the party still did not stipulate atheism as a prerequisite for membership. Even more, no one would be excluded from party membership if he or she held to religious belief. As Lenin stated forcefully: ‘Organisations belonging to the R.S.D.L.P. [Russian Social Democratic Labour Party] have never distinguished their members according to religion, never asked them about their religion and never will’.

Have communist parties today taken a different approach? As for the Cuban Communist Party, it initially banned religious commitment for its members. Even then, many of the members professed atheism while maintaining religious observance at home. So at the fourth congress of 1991 it decided to remove ‘religious beliefs’ as an ‘obstacle’ for anyone who sought to become a member. In the Central Committee’s Report to the sixth congress of 2011, it was noted that ‘congruence between revolutionary doctrine and religious faith is rooted in the very foundations of the nation’. To back this up, a statement from none other than Fidel Castro (in 1971) was used: ‘I tell you that there are ten thousand times more coincidences of Christianity with Communism than there might be with Capitalism’.

Few are the communist parties that require atheism of their members – apart from the Chinese Communist Party. Here at last is a party that officially bans religious belief among those seeking to become members. Indeed, in the process of becoming a member, a candidate is asked whether he or she has professed any religious beliefs. Anyone found to have done so is called upon to rectify such beliefs. According to Professor Li Yunlong, from the Party School of the CPC Central Committee, ‘Party members are banned from joining religions. Believing in communism and atheism is a basic requirement to become a Party member’. At last we have a communist party that is explicitly atheist, banning aspiring members who might be otherwise.

YET, THERE IS A TYPICAL CHINESE TWIST: ONE MUST BE AN ATHEIST UPON ENTRY TO THE PARTY, BUT SHOULD ONE BECOME RELIGIOUS AT A LATER POINT, THEN LITTLE IS USUALLY DONE – AT LEAST IF ONE KEEPS SUCH BELIEFS DISCREET AND DOES NOT PROPAGATE THEM. THUS, ONE MIGHT BE A BELIEVER WITHOUT BELIEF.

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