

Marx and Luther

Radio National promos for the week of programs 'Reformation to Revolution' link Luther to Marx. In *Capital*, Marx quotes several long passages from Luther, often against usury. (Penguin, 1976, p. 740, n. 22) Of course, he and Engels denounced Luther's betrayal of the peasants' revolt. Literary critics, meanwhile, hear Luther's German bible – along with Heine's irony - in Marx's terse prose. (S.S. Prawer, *Marx and World Literature*, OUP, 1978, pp. 316 and 420).

On one RN show, Luther's latest biographer mentioned how Marx in the 1840s had linked the Reformation to the start of human emancipation. He then slid into the 'received opinion' about Marx's dismissal of religion as the 'opiate of the people'.

As with Descartes' dualism. Leibniz's 'best of all possible worlds' and Nietzsche's 'God is dead', Marx's 'opiate' remark is an instance of conventional wisdom (ignorance). This tyranny of cliché confirms Russell Jacoby's 1975 *Telos* essay on how capitalism produces not only a law of the tendency of the profit to fall but also a law of the tendency of the rate of intelligence to fall.

Here is the passage from which Marx's phrase is grabbed, which shows that Marx is saying something more than the usual misinterpretation that religion puts people to sleep.

Religious distress is at the same time the *expression* of real distress and also the *protest* against real distress. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, just as it is the spirit of spiritless conditions. It is the *opium* of the people.

To abolish religion as the *illusory* happiness of the people is to demand their *real* happiness. The demand to give up illusions about the existing state of affairs is the *demand to give up a state of affairs which needs illusions*. The criticism of religion is therefore *in embryo the criticism of the value of tears*, the *halo* of which is religion.

Marx-Engels Collected Works, vol. 3, Lawrence and Wishart, London, 1975, pp. 175-6; *Marx and Engels on Religion*, Foreign Languages Publishing House, Moscow, 1957.

Marx might be playing off the egregious Soame Jenyn: 'Ignorance is the opiate of the poor, a cordial administered by the kindly purposes of Providence', *A Free Enquiry into the Nature and Origin of Evil* (1757); or from Honore Balzac: 'The passion for lotteries ... was the opium of poverty ...', *The Black Sheep*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1970, p. 88.

For a Christian scholar's appreciation, N. Lobkowitz, 'Karl Marx's Attitude toward Religion', *Review of Politics*, 26 (3), July 1964, pp. 319-52.