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All That Is Holy: The Role of Religion in Postcapitalist Communities

Jon Wittrock

Inspired by the works of Marx and Engels, this essay addresses the role of religion in postcapitalist communities by adopting a Wittgensteinian understanding of religion as a series of elements held together by family resemblances rather than a monolithic entity with a core essence. It analyzes proposals concerning both the content of religion, in terms of needs and functions, and also the potential form of religion, in terms of the degree of voluntary cooperation and the extent to which practices are open to continuous reinterpretation and transformation. The essay concludes that it would be desirable to retain many elements commonly considered as core components of "religion"—including collective rituals, sacred sites and symbols, metanarratives, and altered states of consciousness—but consciously transformed and organized in a framework characterized by voluntary cooperation and an openness to continuous transformation that is comprehensive in range and adapting to the shifting cultural and power-political contexts of the communities in question.

Key Words: Karl Marx, Postcapitalist, Religion, Ritual, Secularization

This essay aims to outline a framework for considering the role of religion in potential postcapitalist communities as inspired by the works of Marx and Engels. “Religion” is understood here as an ambiguous term that refers to a host of behavioral and conceptual components, and the communities in question are conceptualized in terms of processes of emergence, rather than a fixed, final state to either reject or affirm.

Although Marx and Engels were not exactly clear on the issue and maybe had good reasons not to be, there are many indications hinting at the kind of community they imagined. For example, in the Communist Manifesto, Marx and Engels (2006, 66) famously proclaimed that “in place of the old bourgeois society, with its classes and class antagonisms, we shall have an association, in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all.” And, in volume 1 of Capital, Marx (2001a, 849) hoped for “a higher form of society, a society in which the full and free development of every individual forms the ruling principle.” In such societies, religious elements could play a vital role.

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Exactly how postcapitalist communities would function with regard to the organization of production and distribution of resources is an issue beyond the scope of this essay. By “postcapitalist communities” this essay refers to communities in which there is, at a minimum, democracy within the workplace, entailing that the workers themselves democratically decide on the allocation of the surplus of production. Such communities may emerge out of the present context of global capitalism by the spread of worker cooperatives, an emphasis on communal economies, and also the critical review and transformation of labor forms that are presently privatized and depoliticized within normative capitalist frameworks (see Gibson-Graham 2006; Resnick and Wolff 2010; Wolff 2012). However, the degree to which there would be markets and monetary exchange, as opposed to other forms of exchange, remains an open question, especially since processes of emergence will be addressed, rather than a set blueprint for a final stage (see Hudis 2012). As for religious practices, this essay argues for a postcapitalist context in which these would neither be influenced by financial interests in a society characterized by vast socioeconomic discrepancies nor take on the form of state religion backed by a monopoly on violence and institutional coercive powers. Rather, religion would be a matter of voluntary cooperation, and any resources allocated to religious practices and institutions would be so allocated as a result of open, democratic decision making. Thus, even if similar practices exist today, a crucial difference would be that, in a postcapitalist context, voluntary practices would neither compete with nor be coerced by actors and institutions of state religion (or by analogous, state-supported ideological formations) or those backed by capitalist monetary interests. Religious practices would be open to continuous reinterpretation and conscious transformation among equals.

The structure of the essay is as follows: First, the ambiguity of concepts of religion and divisions into the religious and the secular are addressed while pointing out that processes of secularization may entail the removal or decline, as well as the transfer and transformation, of religious elements and that such processes may be more or less consciously considered. Thereafter, the question of state religion is raised along with the proposal that postcapitalist communities endorse democratic decision making and open deliberation in consciously considering the potential appropriation and transformation of religious elements. Following that, it is argued that the scope of appropriation should not be needlessly restrictive (e.g., focusing exclusively on issues of faith or morality) but rather comprehensive, scrutinizing a broad spectrum of religious elements that may be disconnected from and reconnected to other elements within continuously emerging and changing constellations. Finally, a general tendency toward deritualization, entailing that the rules, aims, and strategies of religious practices are open to continuous reinterpretation and transformation, is declared to be desirable but also dependent on the power-political context in which postcapitalist communities find themselves. Needless to say, such communities may come to vary from each other to a great extent over time and will draw upon different traditions and cultural contexts.

The following is a proposal, built upon a certain selection of theories and research, as is indeed unavoidable. The aim of this essay is not to provide concrete
policy proposals but rather to sketch a roadmap for people who may want to
explore this topic in greater detail in the future. Thus, several key concepts and
distinctions are advanced that will hopefully prove to be helpful for subsequent dis-
cussions; in general, the aim is to formulate a fruitful framework of analysis
pertaining to the question of religion in postcapitalist communities as inspired
by the works of Marx and Engels. The conclusion is that processes of secularization
within postcapitalist communities should be conscious, communal, comprehensive,
continuous, and undertaken in the context of dynamically emerging constellations.

Religion: An Ambiguous Concept

In a famous passage on religion, Marx (1997, 250) indicated that religion is a complex
topic, a domain of contradictory tendencies and impulses: “Religious suffering is the ex-
pression of real suffering and at the same time the protest against real suffering. Religion
is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, as it is the spirit of
spiritless conditions. It is the opium of the people. The abolition of religion as people’s
illusory happiness is the demand for their real happiness.” Expanding on this insight, we
would do well not to insist on some monolithic understanding of “religion” modeled on
Christian and Jewish traditions and institutions. Instead of attempting to find some es-
tential core that defines “religion,” it is more practicable to treat it as an ambiguous
concept, the various usages of which are held together by what Wittgenstein (2009,
36, 36e) called family resemblances (Familienähnlichkeiten). Just as in a family there may
be an overlap of similarities in features between its different members without all of
them sharing all features, concepts may refer to a host of elements that overlap in dif-
ferent ways rather than having one single core essence shared by all elements. Thus, we
are not looking for “something that is common to all, but similarities, affinities, and a
whole series of them at that.” However, a Wittgensteinian approach to religion need
not entail that we restrict ourselves to following in the path of Wittgenstein’s own spe-
cific focus when considering religious elements: in analyzing religion in terms of family
resemblances, including a broad range of concepts and practices, we need not restrict
ourselves to those specific aspects of religion discussed by Wittgenstein (1980, 56;
1993, 43; 1999, 107), who was himself very interested in a sense of wonder at the existence
of the world as a whole and at the emergence of beings in the world.

The above implies that it is difficult to trace the boundaries of religion and to
draw a clear distinction between the religious and the secular; many conceptual
and pragmatic elements that are usually perceived as being secular are clearly
related to religious elements by way of being inspired by or modeled upon them,
or simply in the sense of obvious structural similarities. Thus, when I write about
religion (with the risk of giving rise to associations with monolithic understandings
based upon a certain view of West Asian monotheistic traditions), I really write
about “religion,” an ambiguous concept pointing to several possible constellations
of a multitude of different conceptual and pragmatic elements. Even though, for the
sake of simplicity, I will leave out the quotation marks in the following, this ambiguity should be kept in mind. As a consequence, we should be open, first, to the ambiguities and multiplicity of religious elements and, second, to the widely different potential roles of configurations of such elements in societal power dynamics.

As Jan Rehmann and Brigitte Kahl (2013, 69) point out, “Religious apparatuses (like ideological apparatuses in general) are not simply the instruments of a ruling ideology, but also the sites in which the ideological struggles around hegemony take place. Their critique is therefore to be fine-tuned so that it does not attack those who fight in these institutions under difficult circumstances for social justice and progressive change.” Furthermore, “Dogmatic accounts that define, once and for all, what religion is miss the point from the outset: religions are not to be defined by a fixed and homogenous essence, even if their official doctrines say the opposite. Both religion and spirituality are fields of social contradiction and struggle and therefore dependent on the ever-changing relations of force.”

**Different Trajectories of Secularization**

As the religious is ambiguous, so is the secular, and, as a consequence, many different actual and potential paths of secularization may be considered. We ought not to reduce religion to hierarchical institutions and rigid doctrines legitimizing existing social structures and providing the projection of illusory compensation in exchange for real exploitation; conversely, however, defenders of existing religious traditions can hardly deny credibly that many such traditions have done this historically and continue to do so in the present, although it is not all they have done and not all of them have always done it. Furthermore, functions that have historically been fulfilled, for example, by churches can also be fulfilled by allegedly “secular” elements, as well, in both capitalist and socialist states. Thus, we should observe that while we often think of processes of secularization as entailing the removal of religious elements from a certain domain, processes of secularization may also include transfer and transformation. Furthermore, such processes can be found not only in conjunction with practices and narratives supporting existing power structures but also in movements challenging them.

We may remember the famous passage from the *Communist Manifesto* about the impact of capitalism: “All that is solid melts into air. All that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind” (Marx and Engels 2006, 38). This does not entail that everything “religious” disappears with the emergence of global capitalism. Indeed, capitalism itself could be perceived in terms of a religion, perhaps as bringing with it a “religion of everyday life,” as Marx (2001b, 1112) put it in volume 3 of *Capital*, pointing to the tendency to view production relations as given entities and that of “proclaiming the physical necessity and eternal justification of their sources of revenue and elevating them to a dogma.” In the case of the societies
Marx criticized, this was an issue of “capital – interest, land – ground rent, labour – wages,” but one could of course extend the basic approach of analyzing the reification and naturalization of culturally and historically situated processes as a form of religion or quasi religion.

Turning to contemporary liberal democracies, even when these are considered to be “secular,” that secularity is an ambiguous, qualified, and complex state of affairs: there remain not only the obvious religious communities but also collective rituals, norms, narratives, and symbols, upheld by states, that pervade the wider culture along with a host of ideological elements that very much resemble religious phenomena, nationalism being an obvious example. Furthermore, constant processes of secularization and desecularization are ongoing in many areas, conceptually and geographically (Berger 1999). Marxist movements have also been analyzed in terms of religious constellations that support or challenge existing social orders. For example, as Joel Kovel (1994, 33) puts it, “Just as religion creates a God which projects the unfulfilled state of human being into the heavens, bearing with it all the desire for domination of life on earth, so can a particular Marxist formation project its unresolvable contradictions into its spirituality.” Thus, “One sign of the pathology of Stalinism was the deification of the leader. Stalin-worship, an undeniably spiritual phenomenon, was in the direct line of Czar-worship, and revealed the failure of Soviet Communism to awaken from the nightmare of its Russian past.”

A question that has indeed been intensely debated is to what extent variants of Marxism themselves could be credibly perceived as forms of religion. This question has been a crucial one to both Marxists and their detractors. For example, Eric Voegelin (1952) controversially characterized broad strands of modern politics, including Marxism, as “gnostic,” in that their adherents want to fundamentally reshape the world and rid it of its evils by means of collective human agency, claiming to possess the insight or gnosis necessary to do so and in effect striving, after the death of God, to turn human beings into divine beings. Karl Löwith (1967, 43) claimed that “the Communist Manifesto is, first of all, a prophetic document, a judgment, and a call to action.” As for the way in which Marxism has been appropriated, we do find what one could call, without reading too much into it, a kind of religious dynamic and fervor; as György Lukács (1983, 63) phrased it, “You cannot just sample Marxism. Either you must be converted to it—and I know that is no easy matter, since it cost me twelve years before I took the decisive step—or else it is perfectly possible to view the world from a left-wing bourgeois perspective.” And Che Guevara (2003, 165) closed his Motorcycle Diaries with the following outburst: “I now knew... I knew that when the great guiding spirit cleaves humanity into two antagonistic halves, I would be with the people [...] I steel my body, ready to do battle, and prepare myself to be a sacred space within which the bestial howl of the triumphant proletariat can resound with new energy and new hope.”

1. This has been repeatedly pointed out by scholars on the subject; see, e.g., Anderson (2002), Hayes (1960), Llobera (1994), Parker (1984, 231), and Smith (2010).
However, if strands and adherents of Marxism could be perceived as being in some ways religious, this need not be the result of an unconscious appropriation and reproduction of religious themes; rather, many Marxists have argued for a conscious appropriation and reinterpretation of religious elements. Herbert Marcuse (1991, 188), for example, wrote that “in the process of civilization, the myth of the Golden Age and the Millennium is subjected to progressive rationalization. The (historically) impossible elements are separated from the possible ones,” and so “in the nineteenth century, the theories of socialism translated the primary myth into sociological terms—or rather discovered in the given historical possibilities the rational core of the myth.” And more recently, Slavoj Žižek (2001, 2) has argued that “against the old liberal slander which draws on the parallel between the Christian and Marxist ‘Messianic’ notion of history what one should do is to reverse the strategy by fully endorsing what one is accused of: yes, there is a direct linkage from Christianity to Marxism.”

In other words, the appropriation of religious elements may be more or less explicit and conscious or implicit and unconscious. A risk of the latter is that we reproduce elements without reflection, thereby blinding ourselves to other potential arrangements and potentially rendering ourselves the captives of a specific constellation that we fail to analyze, simply taking it for granted as something we cannot do without, but that we do not really seriously commit to—for example, accepting the rituals and symbols of the nation as a set of quaint customs that are, for some opaque reasons, indispensable but not to be taken seriously. The advantage of a conscious process of appropriation and transformation, conversely, is exactly that we would reflect upon the functions that religious elements fulfill and would thus be able to visualize alternative arrangements that could fulfill those functions, if they are indeed indispensable, or we would be able to reveal by way of a closer analysis that they are dispensable.

Thus, the question that really interests me here is neither whether strands of Marxism could be credibly described as religious, nor to what extent or how Marx himself was consciously or unconsciously inspired by religious traditions and institutions. Rather, the question that concerns me is that of the desirable trajectories of secularization, whether in the form of the removal or abolition of religious elements or of their reinterpretation and transformation, as conscious processes, when considering potential postcapitalist communities as inspired by the works of Marx and Engels. To put it succinctly, should we envisage a postcapitalist state religion or, conversely, perhaps advocate for the abolition of any religious elements from postcapitalist communities?

Postcapitalist State Religion? Collectivization and Communalization

Taking the works of Marx and Engels as our point of departure, we may observe that there is not a single, coherent theory of the state presented within those texts.
Of importance to subsequent Marxist theorizing, however, have been three tensions within and between their works: first, the tension between viewing the state as an instrument of the ruling class or as an independent entity; second, the tension between opposing articulations about a potential revolution in Russia; and third, the tension between different interpretations of the dictatorship of the proletariat.

As for the first tension, as Jens Bartelson (2001, 118–19) puts it, Marx’s critique of Hegel implies, on one hand, that “the state is an empirical institution, consisting of a mass of men organized into a political community and subjected to a common political authority ... Conceptualized in this way, the state derives from the structure of society and therefore inevitably reflects the constellation of interests within it.” However, the notion of the state proposed in the German Ideology implies, on the other hand, not “a passive object entirely dependent on forces outside of itself for its existence, but rather the notion of an entity which has the capacity to act on behalf of these forces” (125). In other words, even if the state is dependent on the forces of capitalism, that dependence may take different forms: the state may be dependent on economic classes or structures (138–48). In a contemporary context, we may mention the influence of interest groups, lobbying, campaign financing, transformations of the forces of production, and the structure of the global capitalist system bringing its own imperatives (e.g., debt, monetary instability, unemployment), and all of these may result in constraints for elected politicians.

As for the second tension, as Marx (2001a, 22) himself put it in volume 1 of Capital, alluding to the laws of capitalist development, “It is a question of these laws themselves, these tendencies working with iron necessity towards inevitable results. The country that is more developed industrially only shows, to the less developed, the image of its own future.” Marx is commenting on England as a paradigm for the future development of industrialization. This posed an obvious problem for those Russian radicals who wanted to go directly from feudalism to socialism. Marx’s own position on the issue may be discerned from his various sketches written in response to an 1881 letter from Vera Zasulich. This whole issue is intertwined with discussions stemming from the Narodnik movement and ideas about the role of the Russian agrarian commune, or obshchina. Basically, Marx (1983, 123–4) made it clear that he was open to contextual nuances and that he supported the role of the Russian communes as a potential vehicle of social transformation (see also Sayer and Corrigan 1987).

As for the third tension, Marx’s concept of a “dictatorship of the proletariat” is reminiscent of the concept of democracy in the sense that it, too, consists of two major parts, both of which can be defined differently to arrive at widely disparate conceptions of political order (see Barany 1997). Thus, democracy may entail anything from the direct rule of a privileged minority to the indirect rule of a vast majority as well as countless other variations; similarly, the dictatorship of the proletariat could entail anything from a brief transitional stage of direct democracy
by a vast majority defending itself against vehement opposition from an armed minority to an ossified totalitarian regime of terror ruled by a single party led by an authoritarian leader. It is clear, however, that Marx’s understanding was certainly not the latter, but in the hands of Vladimir Lenin, the dictatorship of the proletariat came to legitimize development in a direction that gave rise to internal as well as external protest; as Alexandra Kollontay (quoted in Barany 1997, 12) put it, “The workers ask—who are we? Are we really the prop of the class dictatorship, or are we just an obedient flock that serves as a support for those who, having severed all ties with the masses, carry out their own policy and build up industry without regard to our opinions and creative abilities under the reliable cover of the Party label?”

All of this ties into the question concerning the form of political organization in postcapitalist communities, which in turn has implications for the role of religion in such settings. It is clear that the people should not simply take control of the bourgeois state and use it for its own purposes, but neither can they be expected to immediately abolish all elements of the state. It may be helpful here to distinguish between repression and coercion: I propose these terms to refer to two fundamental characteristics of the modern state.

As Derek Sayer and Phillip Corrigan (1987, 74) formulate it, according to Marx, “The modern state form as such is intrinsically bourgeois because the boundaries of political and private, general and personal, collective and individual which it presupposes and articulates are those corresponding to the conditions of commodity production … These boundaries circumscribe what counts and can be practiced as politics, not just conceptually but materially through the means of action they make available or deny.” Coercion used to maintain this structure, thus maintaining what Marx understood as a relationship between exploiters and exploited, is what I call repression. Coercion, however, need not be repressive: if by coercion we mean either the use of force, backed up by violence, to defend a collective against violent attacks or the use of force by police and courts to detain and punish criminals, it is not necessarily repressive, in this specific sense. It should be noted that repression is both inclusive and exclusive—as Agamben (1998), for example, has pointed out—whereas coercion need not be.

A postcapitalist society based upon Marx’s vision must not be repressive: that is, it must not separate people into classes, and it must not allow for a distinct group of rulers to rule over the majority as a disconnected group of permanent “politicians” or “bureaucrats”; and it must not use violence or the threat of violence in a way that is discriminatory or maintains conditions of direct, indirect, or systemic discrimination. It may, however, and perhaps will have to, use violence and coercion: for example, to defend itself against attacks from without or to detain murderers and rapists (although at least some of these could conceivably be subjected to treatment or therapy rather than simply being locked up in prison). Hence, a postcapitalist society may well be a state in a limited Weberian (1994) sense, with a
monopoly on the legitimate use of force and territorial sovereignty in relation to surrounding communities, but it must not be a repressive state.

However, the question of the role of the state could be perceived as simply one set of possible instances of a wider question concerning the communalization or collectivization of religious elements: that is, state coercion or support backed by coercion (e.g., financial contributions, tax exemptions) is one form for collectivizing religion in certain ways, but not the only one. Communal cultural customs enforced by shaming, for example, could be another, as could leaving all religious elements to voluntary associations between free and cooperating individuals, without any shaming or even any implicit cultural coercion. I envisage communalization and collectivization as an analytical continuum where the extreme end of collectivization would be an authoritarian and totalitarian system forcing people to do certain things, whereas the extreme end of communalization would entail that people freely and spontaneously agree to do some things together without any kind of coercion.

Of course, this is a much more difficult question in actual practice than the simple polarity between collectivization and communalization may let on, especially if misread as a dichotomy. We should remember, however, that when we consider communalization in a postcapitalist community, we are not concerned with what in a capitalist state is called civil society. Thus, in a postcapitalist community there are not, for example, what a theorist like Althusser (2012, 80–6) would call ideological state apparatuses, the rituals of which reproduce the ideology of the ruling class or class constellation. Rather, we should envisage a community in which democratic councils make decisions regarding the production and maintenance of, for example, public transportation, as well as regarding the erection of communal gathering spaces, the adoption of shared symbols, and the proclamation of communal feasts and holidays. This does not entail a lack of conflict concerning these decisions, but these conflicts would not take place under conditions of vast socioeconomic inequalities with great discrepancies between agents in their capacity to financially support this or that venture. Rather, such conflicts would be resolved democratically. This would not only involve processes of voting but also the continuous and open deliberation necessary for “the process of revolutionary transformation not as a singular act ... but as consistently self-critical social revolution,” ultimately aiming for “a new society ... that produces man in this entire richness of his being—produces the rich man profoundly endowed with all the senses” (Hudis 2012, 73–4).

What, however, does this imply for the actual religious elements adopted by such democratic postcapitalist communities? What elements should they retrieve out of existing religious traditions, and which forms should those elements take in a postcapitalist community? That, of course, would be up to those communities. The following is no fixed blueprint but rather a series of explorations offered as a source of inspiration for further debates and analyses.
Needs, Functions, and the Scope of Secularization

One common approach to the role of religion points to basic human needs or vital functions that religions have fulfilled and that would have to be fulfilled in postcapitalist communities as well. This type of analysis may be followed up by an argument advocating for a separation of the fulfillment of those functions from those aspects of historical religions that are not desirable. For example, Jan Rehmann and Brigitte Kahl (2013, 70) point to aspects shared by both religious and secular movements, what they call a “spirituality of the commons”: “The difficulties of maintaining hope in the midst of defeats; the necessity of finding some collective and individual coherence in the midst of contradictions; the problem of agency when there seems to be no way out; the importance of faith in its original ancient meanings of trust, faithfulness, truthfulness, reciprocity, and mutual reliability; the desire for love, recognition, and a meaningful life—all of these concern secular and religious movements alike.” Thus, they argue that “progressives (both secular and religious) need to learn the skills to mutually translate the different discourses. They might even find a common ethical and spiritual core, similar to the one the young Marx described as the ‘categorical imperative to overthrow all relations in which the human being is a debased, enslaved, forsaken, despicable being’.”

This, however, is not the religion of a future postcapitalist community but rather of movements resisting the problems and pathologies of present societies. Nevertheless, Rehmann and Kahl (2013, 70) do offer some thoughts on a future community:

Life, relationships, and love will certainly, to an extent, remain enigmatic and mysterious in many respects. Humans will continue to wrestle with the finitude and fragility of our existence on this planet. There will be death, disease, and crises of all kinds... The point is not to naively depict a world without problems and humans becoming “perfect,” but rather to imagine how to develop a new wisdom to deal with the contradictions of life, to develop a new capacity to set free the enormous potentials and mysteries of human spirituality, hope, and solidarity that are at present predominantly (but never entirely) administered and shaped by markets, profit interests, and ideological powers.

This community, they hint, might entail what religious traditions have envisaged as “vertical” relationships (e.g., to God) being transformed into “horizontal” relationships (to nature and other human beings), a perspective they also find in certain strands of theology. Who would decide on the direction of this venture? “What is relevant is not the terminology,” Rehmann and Kahl argue, “but the possibility that the people finally assume the democratic power to make decisions about their conditions of work and of social life—without the intervention of
superordinate powers and apparatuses” (71). They then refer to Ernst Bloch and his
thoughts on how progressives could draw upon religious legacies, “transforming
the religious ‘drive upward’ into a ‘drive forward,’ by transforming religious tran-
scendence into a ‘human venturing beyond self’ or an ‘act of transcending without
any heavenly transcendence but with an understanding of it.’ In this perspective,
Bloch writes, ‘God’ can be understood as ‘the hypostatized ideal of the human
essence which has not yet become in reality’” (71).

A similar take to that of Rehmann and Kahl is offered by Kevin M. Brien (2009),
who outlines a “humanistic-Marxist spiritual mode” addressing the fundamental
human needs for “an orienting worldview,” “community with others,” “creative ex-
pression,” “meaning,” “wholeness,” and “some kind of value perspective.” These
needs would be met through

an experiential recognition that the human being is a being of nature interact-
ing with other human beings and with nature ... manifest in an active interre-
lation between people such that there is an experiential recognition of human
individuals as social individuals—both the recognition that individuals
become the particular kind of social individuals they are by virtue of the par-
ticular ways they interact with each other and the recognition that the most
positive development of human individuals is dynamically bound up with
the most positive development of their social relationships... the many-
sided, creative unfolding of individual powers is an unfolding that does not
seek to dominate the other, but does not let itself be dominated by the
other, either ... meaning would be addressed by adopting modes of activity
that are experienced as meaningful rather than as an onerous means to
some end that is to be realized by the activity—that is, some wished-for
goal that lies outside the activity itself... But it would also be manifested in
the need for the transformation of the various dimensions of the human
psyche—cognition, conation, sensuousness, intuition, sensation—as they
obtain in alienated modes of consciousness, and their subsequent harmonious
integration in more holistic modes ... one treats others, and oneself also, as
whole human beings, a practice that involves the recognition that the fully de-
veloped freedom of each is tied up with the fully developed freedom of all.
(112–13)

Drawing upon Marx, Brien envisages “a revolutionary practice that successfully
transforms the secular basis so that the spiritual dimension can be fulfilled in a
this-worldly way that does not require recourse to an imaginary being” (114).

The approaches presented above exemplify certain themes that have been
common to many attempts at dealing with religious legacies, and they insist that
we may retrieve a shared ethical core out of religious traditions and that we
may dispense with, or at least set aside our differences concerning, beliefs in “imag-
inary” beings or “transcendent” spheres of reality. Here, however, we should be
cautious on two accounts.
First, we should be wary of a certain ontological arrogance. It is not easy to ascertain whether a certain belief is indeed a belief in an “imaginary” being, according to what epistemological criteria it is so, or whether there are transcendent realities and, if so, what that even means. Beliefs about God(s), spirits, or metaphysical realities are not inherently undesirable but are undesirable to the extent that they emanate from actual suffering in this world for which compensation and atonement is offered in another world in a way that stifles legitimate protest and legitimizes cruel and unjust socioeconomic systems. The question is thus not one of beliefs concerning divine or other spiritual beings or realities, per se, but is rather one concerning within which organizational frameworks such beliefs are nestled: for example, a framework in which a few people spontaneously come together to enjoy a speculative dialogue on potential spiritual realities versus one involving a shared institutional setting incorporating aspects of coercion. If people living in a just and free democratic community without poverty and repression believe in or enjoy speculating about God(s) or spirits or a life after death, there is nothing inherently wrong about that, whereas if people believe in the promises of Stalin because they live under oppressive conditions in a totalitarian system legitimizing itself by recourse to Marx’s works, that is certainly a huge problem, even if nobody claims Stalin is an immortal god who offers happiness and a fulfilled life beyond death. This, to me, seems the reasonable take on the issue of projection, rather than pinning its destructive aspects to specific ontological beliefs.

Second, we should be cautious so that we do not needlessly restrict the ranges of religious elements we deem worthy of appropriation. Our movements of appropriation—of reinterpretation and transformation, that is—should be comprehensive in scope rather than needlessly restrictive.

Continuous and Comprehensive Transformations of Religious Elements

While concepts of faith and belief are indeed central to those West Asian monotheistic traditions that exerted a vast influence on the cultural context in which Marx and Engels wrote, and while they continue to be very influential in large parts of the world, a host of traditions and practices do not focus on such issues. Religious elements include practices of asceticism and meditation, ecstatic drumming and dancing, and phenomenological explorations and overwhelming states of consciousness that may, but need not, be tied to beliefs in God(s) or experiences of supernatural or spiritual realms and beings. Exactly how such states of consciousness should be arranged into a typology and what causes them remain contested questions and arguably a matter of speculation (see, e.g., Boyer 2001; Dennett 2007; Eliade 1987; Hart 2013; Newberg 2010; Otto 1950; Persson and Savulescu 2013). It is clear, however, that intense states of consciousness, which are often labeled “religious,” are not exclusively something that ostensibly religious people
enter into; indeed, self-professed atheists may also enjoy, and be puzzled by, such experiences (see, e.g., Ehrenreich 2014). It remains clear, however, that such experiences may be overwhelming as well as immensely enjoyable.\(^2\)

Norms delimiting sacred domains as well as taboos and distinctions between purity and pollution have also commonly been understood as key and perhaps essential and generative elements of religion (see, e.g., Durkheim 1995, 44; Douglas 2002). Even if such elements may originally have emerged to protect people from pathogens (see Haidt 2012, 170–7), a wide range of analogous norms and practices can be found in many areas, from xenophobic attacks to taboos and sacred values (even if ostensibly secular ones) in public debates and political projects (see, e.g., Tetlock 2003; Atran and Ginges 2012).

Collective rituals comprise another area commonly associated with the core of religion. As Harvey Whitehouse (2012, 269) points out, “Anthropologists and psychologists have assembled systematic evidence that ritual participation increases trust and cooperation among participants, by acting as a costly and therefore hard-to-fake signal of commitment to the group.” This implies neither that all participants interpret the ritual in the same way nor that they have the same emotional response to the ritual. It does, however, indicate that collective rituals are an important topic when reflecting on alternative social arrangements. Rare “rites of terror” that incorporate traumatic experiences, Whitehouse observes, produce intense cohesion in smaller groups but also increase hostility toward outsiders, whereas routinized rituals reproduce less intense group cohesion that extends beyond the domain of personal interrelations, facilitating the rise and expansion of vast religious and ideological movements and traditions. This raises the question as to whether abolishing such elements is desirable or even feasible; at the very least, some caution should probably be exercised to avoid carelessly glossing over such issues.

The integrative function of communal rituals has been the focus of several theorists, perhaps most famously in the works of Émile Durkheim (1995, 208–18), who described the collective effervescence of the coming together of a community. This coming together entails inclusion as well as exclusion, and in both cases considerable violence may be involved; there are of course rituals of blame projection, scapegoating, and warfare (Platvoet 1994). Some have seen rituals as particularly tied to fascism (see, e.g., Guibernau 1996, 95), but both socialist states, as well as those revolting against them, and democratic movements protesting against authoritarian regimes have made use of rituals and symbols (Lane 1981; Sharp 2011, 125).

The very word ritual derives from the Latin *ritus*: “ritual,” “ceremony,” or “custom” (see Asad 2010). One key component of ritual behavior that has been noted by scholars is the *repetition* of words and acts within the ritual, but the ritual in its entirety may also be perceived as a repetition of a significant event of the past (Bloch 2005, 24). Rituals may involve active participants as well as

\(^2\) One witness uses the expression “liquid love”; see James (2011, 255).
witnesses or guests who may play a significant role in validating them (see Baumann 1992). Conversely, participants of a ritual may not actually endow it with much meaning, and one complaint entails that the outward display and the inner experience of the ritual may become disjointed (see Asad 2010).

Several theorists have joined together the concepts of ritual and play, arguing that the latter implies a distinct and perhaps desirable experience of time (e.g., “flow”; see Gadamer 1986, 40–2; Bellah 2011, 590). Play could also entail a potential for creativity and innovation (see Huizinga 2001, 13; Schechner 1993, 40–2). Thus, spaces of play could be areas of experimentation and social transformation or, as Richard Schechner (1993, 262) puts it, “performed dreams.” Conversely, rituals of antagonism as well as role reversal could paradoxically reinforce established social roles and hierarchies (see, e.g., Seligman et al. 2008, chap. 3). Rituals may handle liminality—zones of transition, as in rites of passage, involving both critical distance from and the reinforcement of social order (see Turner 1970, 105–7).

Furthermore, we may note that there is a tension between narrower and broader definitions of ritual, both of which involve their own risks. Thus, Jack Goody (1977, 27) complains about the results of adopting too broad a definition, observing that one study’s finding that “rituals are of far greater importance in an industrial society such as modern Britain than is often realized” is perhaps not that surprising given what was counted as ritual: “Handshaking, teeth cleaning, taking medicines, car riding, eating, entertaining guests, drinking tea, coffee, beer, sherry, whisky, etc., taking a dog for a walk, watching television, going to the cinema, listening to records, visiting relatives, routines at work, singing at work, children’s street games, hunting and so on.” Others have inevitably attempted to avoid both a too narrow and too broad definition by referring to Wittgenstein’s concept of family resemblance (e.g., Platvoet 1995, 26), as I myself did when addressing the question of defining religion. The problem is that, to focus on a final tension, ritual may be understood either as an empirical category roughly corresponding to what some people are accustomed to label as “ritual” or as an analytical category defined with some precision, which may imply that some things we do not usually call “ritual” may be counted as ritual, and vice versa.

From Ritual to Play: A Behavioral Continuum

Finally, we should consider the behavioral form of religious elements, regardless of the extent and form of their communalization or collectivization. In the following I will use ritual as an analytical category and address the question concerning the behavioral form of religion by drawing upon an analytical framework of three ideal types or forms of human activity: play, game, and ritual. Ritual is invoked here as an analytical category in order to explore not a specific kind of religious practice but rather the normative structure of any such practice. I propose the following definitions of these ideal types: In play, rules, aims, and strategies are all
open to continuous renegotiation and transformation within the confines of play itself. In game, rules and aims are set while strategies are open. In ritual, rules, aims, and strategies are all set.

Thus, in play, rules, aims, and strategies are not fixed within the parameters of play. That does not mean that there are no norms or limitations guiding play, but these norms and limitations are not fixed by play itself but rather emerge from other spheres of activity (e.g., law, cultural customs, biological needs) or through a continuous transformation of play itself as it goes along. In a game, however, rules and aims are set and agreed upon beforehand while strategies—how participants attempt to realize the stated aims—are open within the confines of the space of possibilities demarcated by the rules. This means, for example, that there are many ways of winning a football match or a game of chess within the parameters set by the rules of football or chess. Finally, in ritual, aims and strategies are all set: this means that one correct course of action is allowed if the ritual is to count as valid. For example, certain words, and only those words, may be required to be uttered in a specific sequence, and so on.

Now, to repeat, these are ideal types: the claim here is not that, for example, all activities commonly called “rituals” display the characteristics of ritual as an ideal type. Ritual, according to this understanding, is not a substantive sphere of human activity but rather a form that such activities may take, and the same goes for game and play. Thus, both football and the affirmation of lifelong, monogamous bonding between lovers may appear empirically as more of play, more of a game, or more of a ritual. Though perhaps less obvious, the same goes for beliefs, norms, and narratives: all of these may be closer to one or the other end along a continuum of ritualization. This does not imply that we say anything about the ultimate or ulterior motives of or reasons for these activities; we are merely speaking of their form and formal aims. Thus, chess may appear empirically as a game with set rules and aims. However, people may play chess for all kinds of reasons or due to a host of more or less conscious motives: money, fame, recognition among friends, relaxation, etc. However, none of this changes the fact that the formal stated aim of standard chess is to win by checkmating the opponent.

We may thus observe that the question of postcapitalist religion is not simply about the desirable status of a monolithic entity called “religion”—presumably modeled upon Jewish and Christian institutions and traditions as the taken-for-granted template for what such an entity could look like—but rather is about a host of elements commonly labeled as “religious” that could enter into different kinds of relationships with each other, as well as with elements outside religion, to form different social configurations, some of which we may want to pursue at different stages in the process of the emergence of postcapitalist communities, as inspired by the works of Marx and Engels. Throughout such processes of emergence, we may embrace or reject certain forms of prefiguration and heterotopic spaces: practices and spaces, that is, that instantiate the desired end of our actions in the present (see, e.g., Yates 2015; Foucault 1984). Thus, we are dealing
not with a final, fixed state of affairs to be condoned or rejected but rather with a continuous trajectory whereby we need to determine what elements, if any, should never be compromised at any stage of the process.

Conclusion: Conscious, Communal, Comprehensive, Continuous Constellations

We set out from the question concerning the role of religion in postcapitalist communities by aiming for the free and full development of all human beings. This is a question to which we are now able to offer a tentative answer: we should advocate conscious, comprehensive, and continuous transformations of religious elements in emerging constellations, as situated in different cultural and power-political contexts.

The early sections of this analysis argued that processes of secularization may entail not only the decline or removal but also the transfer and transformation of religious elements. They also argued that such processes may be more or less consciously considered, and this option was condoned. The subsequent sections contained arguments to the effect that those processes ought also to be communal and comprehensive—that is, in the former instance, undertaken through free deliberation and democratic decision making and, in the latter, not unnecessarily restricted in terms of the concepts and practices under consideration for appropriation (e.g., only considering religion in terms of altruism, ethics, faith, or beliefs). Finally, it was observed that we are reflecting upon the continuous emergence of contextually situated constellations of elements rather than a fixed and final transition pertaining to specific combinations of religious components.

Conscious, Comprehensive, Communal Transformations

Removing or reproducing religious elements without reflection entails a number of potential risks and opportunity costs. There is thus the risk that:

- We simply reject all of “religion,” failing to separate what is desirable from what is not and perhaps weakening ourselves in the process by leaving some strategically relevant element (e.g., collective rituals, phenomenological exploration) as a monopoly held by our opponents.

- We fail to consider alternative analogous arrangements. Clearly, while we should not support monasteries that legitimize an ideology that leaves the mass of people exploited and suffering from abject poverty, this does not necessarily imply that we would not want to support some other institution in which people may explore intense states of consciousness in a physically and psychologically safe setting, followed by open, informed debates about
the potential theoretical and practical implications. This is merely one example of the logic of a conscious, comprehensive, transformative approach to the question of secularization, which may apply to any “religious” element.

– We become captive to a host of elements that are reproduced without reflection, as being vaguely indispensable, and hence, while perhaps not exactly desirable, nevertheless constitute something we believe that we cannot do without.

Continuously Emerging Constellations

First, considering continuously developing constellations implies that we reflect upon different alternatives at different stages of the process of a community’s emergence. Thus, in a context where a community is fragile and threatened by external enemies, it may be that a ritualization of collective gatherings and other practices is required, whereas a stable community interacting peacefully with surrounding communities may allow for more playful practices throughout the entire spectrum of religious elements. The size of the community may also play a role: a smaller community in intense conflict with other political actors may come to favor—whether we like it or not—small-scale, intense rituals that increase both social cohesion and also hostility to outsiders, whereas larger communities would more likely favor routinized rituals that enable the socialization of people beyond the reach of personal relations. If a trajectory of emergence is uneven, so that periods of struggle and periods of stability succeed each other, we might expect ritualization to emerge and crystallize in the former periods, whereas there will be room for more playfulness in the latter periods, during which a postcapitalist community is relatively secure in its existence and continuous reproduction.

What, however, should be the normative core that we hold onto throughout the entire stage of the emergence of postcapitalist communities? A plausible suggestion could draw upon the existing human-rights framework as a point of departure, encouraging an interpretation along the lines suggested by Martha Nussbaum. Nussbaum (2002, 129) refers to a passage in Marx’s 1844 Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts: “For the starving man, it is not the human form of food that exists, but only its abstract being as food.” The point here is that we should aid people in developing their core capabilities in such a way that they may live with dignity, as fully human. This intuition of human dignity, built upon a fusion of Marx and the human-rights edifice, could potentially serve as the origin for a core value of postcapitalist communities, an aim to be kept in mind throughout their emergence, entailing some minimal standards and prohibitions that are never sacrificed, even in times of emergency (see, e.g., article 4.2 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights).
Second, since we are reflecting upon constellations of elements, we should not merely consider whether an element is desirable or not in itself, thought of as an isolated whole, but rather how elements may be nestled within different contexts and interrelated differently to each other. Elements nestled within and supporting an unjust and exploitative order are thereby undesirable; if, however, they can be resituated within a just and democratic order, they may not be undesirable. There is nothing at first glance that suggests that postcapitalist communities would not have monuments and memorials and various kinds of sacred sites, shared symbols, and communal rituals. This could include competitive rituals that playfully channel antagonistic impulses without causing social disruption and spaces for creative social transformation; however, rituals of role reversal would probably not be necessary if the most ambitious hopes for a continuous, fluid motion of role exchange in society in general became reality, and rituals of scapegoating and exclusion would not be condoned.

Finally, if we do aim for the ideals sketched by Marx and Engels, we should probably, to the extent feasible, favor play over ritualization, encouraging an openness to continuous reinterpretation and transformation and striving for the free development of all members of the community. Furthermore, Marx and Engels (2006, 61–6) would likely have hoped for the dissolution of the boundaries between the sacred and profane, in a transformed sense, in line with the general tendency of dissolving boundaries outlined, for example, in the Communist Manifesto. This would also entail that petrified social roles, such as those of the priest or the shaman, would be replaced by a rotation of roles so that one person may, for example, hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, meditate in the evening, and be a shaman after dinner.

References


