

EDITORIAL

IS SOCIALISM A RELIGION?

By DANIEL DE LEON

WITH increasing frequency one hears nowadays the theory advanced that Socialism is a religion.

The opinion is expressed in seemingly contradictory senses—sometimes it is a “charge,” bluntly made; other times it is meant as a “praise,” the kind of “praise” that is meant to damn.

For instance, and to take just two typical instances:—

A book entitled *Socialism*, and which contains, besides the papal encyclical *Rerum Novarum*, reprints of articles that appeared “from time to time since 1903” in the *Catholic Mind*, an organ of the political-business, that is, Ultramontane, hierarchy of Roman Catholicism, after reciting a long list of deadly sins that Socialism is the apostle of, caps them all with the angry charge that “the most serious feature of Socialism is that it has or is a religion.”

On the other hand, Professor Willard C. Fisher, recently of the faculty of Wesleyan University, pointedly denies that “Socialism is or could be a religion.”

It is first of all necessary to be clear upon what is “religion.”

No sooner is the job undertaken to define “Religion” when one finds himself “lost in the wilderness.”

The word “Religion” is used in a broad, literary or ethic meaning; and it is used in a strict, dogmatic sense. Nor is this the worst of it.

Within the literary or ethic frame, “Religion” has a myriad meanings—the “Religion” of the poet is a different article from the “Religion” of the altruist. Within the strict and dogmatic frame, the meanings of “Religion” are still more manifold—the “Religion” of the Scotch Presbyterian with his hell “paved with the skulls of babies” born to be damned, and to be saved by grace only, is a very different article from the

“Religion” of the Catholic who banks salvation upon “deeds”; or from the “Religion” of the Jew who banks salvation upon “the seed of Abraham” and a surgical operation.

To take a bird’s-eye view of “Religion” in these different frames—“Religion” operates in exactly opposite directions when applied by the “heathen” who “religiously” put an end to the life of an incurable sufferer, a manifestation that we see repeated among Christian soldiers, who give the “coup de grace” to a fallen comrade and thus relieve him of further pain,—“Religion operates in exactly the opposite direction when other Christians prolong by all possible means the life, and thereby the sufferings of a patient painfully stricken; again, the “Religion” of the Crusaders against the Albigensan “heretics” whom the Crusaders slaughtered, men, women and children, can not be the same article which animated the identical Albigensans when they tenderly tended their wounded assailants; irreconcilable is the “Religion” of the astronomer who said of his science “it is my religion,” and the “Religion” of those who sought to burn him at the stake “for the greater glory of God.” The clash and chaos of Religions is well summed up by the epigram of Schiller who rejected “Religion” because of his religiousness.

We deliberately abstain from looking into the Standard, or any other dictionary for a definition of “Religion”; and proceed to state what, boiled down to its historic and sociological essence, “Religion” is.

When Moses descended the slopes of Sinai, and handed down the Ten Commandments to the Jews, as a message received amid lightning and thunder from Jehovah, he knew a number of things:—he knew he was not telling the truth; he knew he was endeavoring to bind and rebind (“ligere{”} and “religere”) the Jews with bonds for their conduct toward one another, on earth; he knew that, as they subsequently did, anyhow, the gents he had to handle would throw stones at him if he told them that the Commandments were commandments of his own make-up; he knew he had to appeal to their imagination; finally, he knew that the bonds he sought to bind his people with would be a hoop to keep them together as an organized body, a body in the flesh.

Drawing the concept of “Religion” from this series of facts; reading the facts by the light of the preceding historic illustrations; aware, moreover, that in such mat-

ters large areas of Social and of Mental Science, although left out of the reckoning, do not affect the main conclusion;—"Religion" may be defined as a term that embraces two distinct ideas, the second flowing from the first:—

The first idea is a code of morals.

The second idea is the concrete organization of men into "creeds"; which practically means the organization of men into the political formations of the State; which, finally and in turn, practically means the organization of men into burgs from which to defend themselves against the need-impelled assaults of others; and, in turn, need-impelled, to war upon all others. From Moses down to Brigham Young, founders of "Religions" were creed, that is, State builders.

Tested by this test, Socialism neither is nor can be a religion—except in the figurative sense used by the astronomer above referred to.

Socialism, differently from "Religion," starts with no code of morals, any more than astronomy. Like astronomy, Socialism gathers the material facts that underlie human society. These co-ordinated facts project a social system that needs not the creed-burgs, or burg-creeds, for the protection of any one organization of men against others. Accordingly, Socialism differs radically from "Religion," which, under Class Rule, fatedly a precursor of Creed, though it starts with morals, as fatedly leads to the immortality of class struggles; whereas, Socialism, starting with the material facts that make mass morals possible, paves the way for social conditions where creeds are no longer needed, the conflicts of Class having had the bottom taken from under them.

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