

Dear Friends,

'Revolution'

This year marks the one hundredth anniversary of the Russian Revolution, which ended the centuries-old rule of the Russian tsars and ushered in the era of Marxist socialism. To Lenin and the Bolsheviks who instigated it, it signalled the demise of the old order with its outmoded, unwanted religious beliefs, and the unstoppable advance of atheistic socialism.

The inspiration for their movement came from the writings of Karl Marx who, as a convinced materialist, maintained that people's beliefs were simply the product of their physical environment. If social or economic circumstances were changed, ideas and opinions would alter with them. He reckoned, for example, that the poor only believed in God because of the oppression they suffered, and because they needed an emotional prop of some kind to keep them going. He was convinced that, once the revolution had taken place and a fairer economic order had been established, religious belief would no longer be required and it would simply fade away.

"Religion," he famously wrote, "is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the feelings of a heartless world, just as it is the spirit of unspiritual conditions. It is the opium of the people. The people cannot really be happy until it has been deprived of illusory happiness by the abolition of religion. The demand that the people should shake itself free of illusion as to its own condition is the demand that it should abandon a condition which needs illusion."

Marx's concern for social injustice and his condemnation of the Church for its frequent failure to champion the poor need to be heard and taken seriously. The prophets in the Old Testament spoke of such matters in a very similar vein (eg Amos 5:11-13, Micah 6:6-8). But his arguments are flawed. His materialistic critique of religious belief, for example, is self-inclusive. If he is right to say that all ideas are merely the product of our social and economic circumstances, then his theories are subject to the same criticism! His claim that religion, always and everywhere, functions as an 'opiate of the people' cannot be justified. At its best religion is a powerful force for social change. Think of the inspirational effect that their Christian faith had on Wilberforce campaigning against slavery, Desmond Tutu supporting the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa, or Oscar Romero and Janani Luwum condemning (at the cost of their lives) the oppressive conduct of military regimes in San Salvador and Uganda respectively. If religion is the chief cause of all our social evils, it is hard to understand why so many millions have suffered and died at the hands of atheistic regimes – in Stalin's Purges, Pol Pot's 'killing fields', and Chairman Mao's 'Cultural Revolution'.

The Russian government has been noticeably reluctant to mark the anniversary of the 1917 February and October Revolutions. President Putin, observers tell us, is uncomfortable about the idea of people 'dancing in the streets' to celebrate the overthrow of a tyrannical ruler! But the Church *is* in the business of (non-violent) change, and the seeds of her quiet revolution are often evident. The Lord Jesus whom we follow is a unique revolutionary, the King of Love, crucified by authorities because he was a threat to their existing order.

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