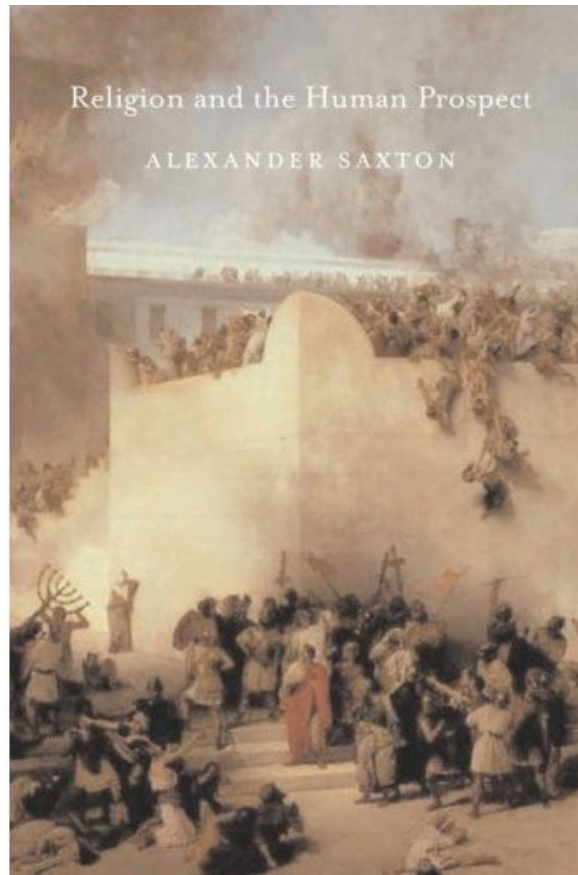


***Religion and the Human Prospect* by Alexander Saxton**

New York: Monthly Review Press, 2006, pp 240

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What is the origin of religion? What accounts for its universality? Is our species primarily *homo religiosus* and only secondarily *homo sapiens*? Has religion been a crucial adaptation in human survival? Has it played a beneficial role in human evolution? Even if so, has some turning point been reached making this no longer so? Why, after all the gains made by science and secularism, has there been a massive worldwide revival of religion and retreat from enlightenment values? These are some of the questions raised by Alexander Saxton in this provocative book.

Saxton sees the origin of religion in a crisis of consciousness grounded in realisation and fear of death:

When the advent of consciousness imposed knowledge of individual death, our ancestors sought solace from this terror by projecting anthropomorphic images onto nature and imputing reality to those images as spiritual beings. (p63)

Religion made possible a representation of a universe that is ultimately orderly and trustworthy. This collective belief system made it possible for our species to overcome paralysing fear of death and thus to survive physically. Moreover, religion maintained morality, ie, social cohesion, even class and gender domination, which enabled the paradoxical progress of civilisation and the advance of culture.

These achievements are now endangered by nuclear, biological, ecological crises. There has been a decisive change of the human condition. The global environment, which once seemed an unbounded resource, is faced with depletion, even extinction. The beliefs and behaviours which served in the struggle for survival and dominance have become rigid, resistant to criticism and dysfunctional to survival. Religion sows divisiveness, not only between creeds and ethnicities, but between scientific knowledge and religious faith. Because religion sets faith above knowledge, it evades the reality that investigation brings into focus and provides ideological cover for a politics of denial, for

the intrusion of ... transcendental hypotheses disrupts the accumulation of scientific knowledge, opening easy escapes from problems that might otherwise be solved through empirical research. (p49)

Despite this, despite the fact that scientific and technological advances have rendered divine intervention diminishingly credible, religion survives and thrives. Validation has shifted from rationalist arguments from design to fideist appeals to inner belief. All sorts of stratagems, such as strictures against reductionism, serve to circumvent critique.

That, in broad strokes, is Saxton's argument. Along the way, he examines the dilemma posed by the problem of evil as dramatised and analysed in scriptures, literature and philosophical and theological texts. Saxton ranges from the *Book of Job* through the writings of Augustine, Milton, Dante to Leibniz, Kant and Schleiermacher. He brings into play the social scientific study of religion as represented by Tylor, Durkheim and Weber as well as the reaction to secularism in Parsons, the Templeton Foundation and postmodernist theology.

The book is learned and its arguments are plausible. I find myself much in agreement with it in its broad outlines. It deserves to be widely read and appreciated. Saxton's approach is better grounded in philosophical and historical argument than such high profile books making a case against religion as *The God Delusion* by Richard Dawkins and *God Is Not Great* by Christopher Hitchens.

However, there are problems that make reading this book a less satisfactory experience than it might be. It is written in a highly abstract mode and does not capture the dynamic of the process in which religion came into the world, took hold and became enmeshed with all else that is human. The intellectual history underlying the argument is astute in its way, but somehow thinned out and inadequately contextualised. It is often written as an internalist history of ideas and texts rather than as a materialist history in which the history of ideas is organically connected to the history of everything else. This is particularly surprising in that Saxton is a professor

emeritus of history as well as a historical novelist. This book is put forward as a materialist history of religion. The book lacks, for example, an adequate explanation of the revival of religion and the retreat from secularism and enlightenment values. This is rooted in the tendency to analyse texts without grounding them in socio-historical forces in a satisfactory way.

Another problem is that some of Saxton's arguments seem not so much wrong as a few degrees off. Most crucially his thesis that the origin of religion is in the fear of death does not give sufficient scope to the origin of religion in a drive to explain the world. Throughout the book, the question of truth is somewhat marginalised. The intellectual quest to come to terms with the origin of the universe, to weigh the arguments for and against the existence of God or gods, is there, but does not come sharply into focus.

There is also Saxton's critique of what he calls marxism's 'failed critique of religion', which I do not find adequately informed or argued. His critique is based on claims that marxism gives no clear definition of religion and no account of its historical origins, that its interpretation of history is deductive not inductive, that its dialectic of nature is idealist and teleological, that it ties religion too closely to ideology, that it has evaded the problem of religion to win support. I do not accept that a study of marxism as an intellectual tradition and a political movement supports any of these claims, although there is some truth in the contention that the movement has sometimes evaded the question of religion to maximise support.

The evidence that Saxton brings to bear on this is very thin and sketchy. It is largely based on the explicit writings of Marx and Engels on religion. It does not consider fully the writings of Marx and Engels on materialism in philosophy and history. Moreover, he ignores the work of subsequent generations of marxists in his unearned generalisations about marxism and its analysis of religion. Of the many works by marxists deserving of attention before leaping to generalisations about marxism on the question of religion, I would cite Lucien Goldmann's *The Hidden God* and the study of religion in Christopher Caudwell's *Studies and Further Studies in a Dying Culture*.

While this is a book well worth reading on the question of religion, it is far from a definitive treatment of the terrain.

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