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1-29-1999

## Religion as Opium, Religion as Vitamin: Comments on Pope John Paul II's Papacy and Political Power

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### Recommended Citation

Editor, IBPP (1999) "Religion as Opium, Religion as Vitamin: Comments on Pope John Paul II's Papacy and Political Power," *International Bulletin of Political Psychology*. Vol. 6 : Iss. 4 , Article 4.  
Available at: <https://commons.erau.edu/ibpp/vol6/iss4/4>

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Title: Religion as Opium, Religion as Vitamin: Comments on Pope John Paul II's Papacy and Political Power

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Volume: 6

Issue: 4

Date: 1999-01-29

Keywords: Political Power, Religion

**Abstract.** This article considers the interface between institutionalized and organized religion on the one hand and formally constituted and secular governmental authority on the other, in the context of Pope John Paul II's papacy.

Espousers of Communist ideologies often cite religion as an opiate of the masses. This citation suggests that the vast majority of people are exploited by the few. How can the few control the many? The masses' exploitation is supported by belief systems that engender misperceptions about the true state of political power relations--e.g., nothing is really wrong or the wrong that exists is actually right. Still other belief systems serve an anodyne function that mitigates against the noxious consequences of exploitation--e.g., there may be plenty wrong, but so what? Both classes of belief systems supporting exploitation are examples of false consciousness. And an exemplar of both classes--say the Communist ideologues--is religion, especially variants associated with institutionalization among a population segment and with hierarchical organizations that possess their own control and coercive mechanisms.

Religious belief systems also may serve a "vitamin" function. Here, religion can dictate the rights and wrongs of life and motivate and impel action towards conforming one's belief with one's action and action with one's belief. More importantly, one seeks to modify the beliefs, actions, and belief-action inconsistencies of others that are deemed to be wrong or not right enough. According to this perspective, religion takes on a revolutionary mantle--as opposed to a cognitive dissonance cloak that would merely appear to conform belief to one's actions that themselves are controlled by others. Religion and its revolutionary mantle often may seem to effect extreme consequences--at least in the short term. Exploitation by oppressors may be shattered by Proponents of the City of God. Yet exploitation may be transferred to God's children, emulated, and even exacerbated with a new set of holy marching orders.

Pope John Paul II has been significantly engaged within this discourse throughout his papacy. Early on, the discourse centered around godless Communist totalitarianism and a "godfull" rightist authoritarianism with God on the side of the elite. As to the former, the Pope advocated the power of faith and spirit almost in the sense of Vaclav Havel's "power of the powerless" as a vehicle leading to some inevitable transcendence of power by the powerless. And this came to pass. As to the latter, the Pope advocated the power of faith and spirit to the virtual exclusion of sociological analyses and political action. A casualty was liberation theology of the poor, not the authoritarian regime of the wealthy. Thus, the same Pope fostered religion as opium and as magic in different venues of contest between Caesar and God.

The present era does not seem to be much different. The Pope's 1998 visit to Cuba may have some small positive effects of religion as vitamin--greater religious tolerance in some sectors by the political authorities and some greater tolerance of non-socialist economic initiatives that might empower some members of the faithful. The Pope's recent visit to Mexico seems to foreshadow religion as opium--by

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omission, if not by commission, the Pope seems to be continuing the trend of reconstituting institutions of Roman Catholicism as of the rich, by the rich, for the rich.

The moral of the story is that religion--especially institutionalized and organized religion--may work for or against formally constituted and secular governmental authority. This has been the case at least since the High Priests of ancient Egypt. The litmus test of whether opium or vitamin is being offered may ultimately rest on what is deemed to strengthen the political power of a religion's nomenclature. In this, lie the seeds of its damnation and salvation. (See Belzen, J.A. (1997). The historicocultural approach in the psychology of religion: Perspectives for interdisciplinary research. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 36, 358-371; Castaneda, J. (January 23, 1999). The Pope and the poor. *The New York Times*, <http://www.nytimes.com>; Helminiak, D.A. (1997). Killing for God's sake: The spiritual crisis in religion and society. *Pastoral Psychology*, 45, 365-374; Williams, R.H. (1996). Religion as political resource: Culture or ideology? *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 35, 368-378.) (Keywords: Political Power, Religion.)