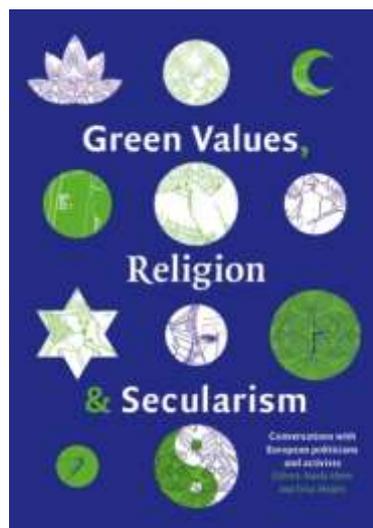


# REPORT

**Green European Foundation, with the support of Green Foundation Ireland, and in partnership with the Centre for Sustainability and Environmental Governance host a**

## DEBATE

*"Green Values and Progressive Politics: Religion, humanism and the ethical basis for political activism"*



**Room 01/052 Lanyon Building,  
Queen's University Belfast**

***Saturday 9 July 2016***

***11:00am – 4:00pm***

**Opening:** John Barry (Professor of Green Economy, Queen's University Belfast) welcomed all those attending and especially keynote speaker Erica Meijers (Editor-in-Chief, *De Helling Journal*). He noted that the publication of *Green Values, Religion and Secularism* was a recognition of the need to take seriously the religious dimension of public life which continued to shape even 'secular' practice in many, often positive, ways. He also pointed to the 2015 Papal encyclical *Laudato si'* as a powerful sign that the Catholic church, with all its global influence, was putting forward environmental issues as being worthy of universal concern. This is a source of hope, and that hope should characterise ensuing discussion.

**Erica Meijers on "Marx, Religion and Politics":** Erica's address began with the observation that the Enlightenment Project embodied in the French Revolution should not be taken for granted. Instead, the fact that both left and right in European politics make 'liberty and equality' their clarion call shows that these ideals are still in the process of being realised. She pointed out that the subtle change between the terminology of the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen* (1789) and the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (1948) posited a unitary 'human' being where the dichotomy of man and citizen in the former document denoted a fissure in identity recognised by Marx and still worth taking seriously.

With this in mind, she turned to a close analysis of Marx's *On the Jewish Question*, published in 1843. In it Marx looked at the situation of the Jews in order to establish a wider analysis of society, and in particular the function and nature of religious and political emancipation. These two are interconnected through this formulation:

*'The critique of heaven is the condition of the critique of earth, and the critique of earth is the fundament for the critique of heaven'.*

Though apparently cryptic, Erica argued that this dialectic is coherent within Marx's understanding of the social geneses of religion on one hand and the state on the other. Both essentially derive from the same source, namely that man perceives the inadequacy in his own being as well as his societal relations and projects these onto the figure of 'God' and 'the state' respectively. This constitutes the fundamental alienation that lies at the heart of Marx's view of the human condition, who as 'man' relates to others out of his real, if unsatisfactory, social identity (determined as it is by relationships of exchange) and as 'citizen' has an identity that is an abstractly conceived functionary of the 'state'. As necessary as it is to overcome this alienation, it cannot be achieved simply by political emancipation (the proletariat's assumption of power from of the capitalist system and those who control it to their advantage) or the abolishing of religion per se. These are steps towards achieving the positive condition of man's self-fulfilment in a mutually beneficial and participatory society where individuals can express their creative potential and meet everybody's needs without dominating or being dominated by others. This is an essentially utopian vision, a 'world without suffering in which peace and justice reign'. Erica closed by arguing that this vision along with the recognition that it could be fulfilled only by individuals being proactive and working in relationship, and not by systems as such, ensures Marx's enduring significance.

**Questions** followed the address, with the main point of contention not being Marx's analysis itself (which was seen as somewhat abstruse) but the extent to which Marx's own thought could be seen as theological. The answer seemed to depend on the extent to which Marx's avowed atheism was

counterbalanced by what could only be called an eschatological perspective. Concern was also raised from the floor about Marx's apparently simplistic anthropology; Erica argued that his 'man/citizen' duality did not represent a thoroughgoing anthropology but instead had a functional role in his analysis of religion and the state.

The **Roundtable Discussion** in the afternoon entailed three statements followed by questions.

**Nuala Ahern** (former Chair of Green Foundation Ireland) began by suggesting that *all* sections of society, not just religious ones, had failed to take with adequate seriousness the challenge of the environment. Christianity (which in the Irish context is, historically at any rate, what is generally meant by the term 'religion') has had a significant impact on four particular areas of concern to Green politics. These are church-state relations, gender, sexuality and the environment itself. The fact that Christianity is so deeply rooted in the establishment of society means that its involvement in these areas cannot be dismissed, but should be regarded critically. In all four areas, in fact, the Christian Church (especially the Roman Catholic Church in the Irish context) has had a mixed impact, though with gender and sexuality this has been mainly negative. This is due, Nuala argued, to misconceptions stemming from Greek philosophy rather than actual biblical sources. The same Hellenistic background is also the most promising place to look for a criticism of the excess that underlies the environmentally destructive capitalism that too often goes uncriticised by Christianity.

**Erica Meijers** offered some personal reflections on the experience of being a Christian Green. She noted that the rather dismissive and patronising attitude towards her faith – that she was either not 'grown-up' or a closet right-winger – revealed an outmoded and reductionistic understanding of religion in general, and Christianity in particular. Indeed, this is perfectly illustrated in the anecdote about the Christian woman whose coming out to her family about her homosexuality was far less traumatic than her coming out to her fellow Green Party members about her religion. The answer, Erica claimed, was a much greater level of education and knowledge about religious beliefs and experiences (of all faiths) and an active dialogue that took religion seriously.

**John Barry** began by echoing the call to co-operation, emphasising that conflicting ideological bases need not be a barrier to working together on practical issues or causes of common concern. This commitment to the common good should have a correspondingly positive view of the environment, looking not only at how it is being destroyed, but how it can be a blessing and benefit to all. Such a stance is intrinsically ethical and brings home the necessity of a proper basis in (and debate over) ethics. Along with a commitment to this or that ethical schema, those who pursue religious or other ideological agendas always have psychological motivations for doing so that must not be downplayed. John drew particular attention to the human need to identify the problem in 'the other' instead of acknowledging that the problem (in this case with a mindlessly destructive capitalist lifestyle) affects, and is perpetuated by, all of us; it is not just one section of society that is guilty. Religion has the helpful role of criticising the arrogance of individuals who purport to stand innocently separate of the wrong in the world or, on the other side, believe that they are capable (and worthy!) of controlling the planet's ecology. John closed with the searching suggestion that the essentially religious character of consumerism and its deification of human desire can be seen in the fact that the tallest buildings in the world's leading cities are now financial centres and not churches. Again, an ethical and not technological response to the situation is vital.

The **Panel Debate** involved five participants, who, by way of opening the discussion, were each invited to make a brief response to the issues raised during the day and the book in particular. **Tanya Jones** (Politician, Green Party NI) made an impassioned plea for a consideration of our common humanity and the need for it to direct our political project in the face of destructive and often oppressive policies. **Brian Ashworth** (Pastor, Kingdom Harvest Church) set out to correct the view that belief in God had diminished in the UK to the point of irrelevance as well as encouraging a more appreciative attitude towards the participatory democracy that operates in this country. **Terry Moseley** (NI Humanist Association) called for a renewed attention to the wonder of nature and humanity in all of their complexity, arguing that this positive stance, not a dismissal of religious belief, forms the basis of humanist thought and engagement in Green issues in particular. **Matt Williams** (Adjunct Lecturer, Union Theological College and Youthlink NI) pointed out that biblically, Christianity can be seen to encourage public, rigorous, and non-violent engagement but that its theological, historical and ideological basis itself must inevitably be engaged with in public discourse, as it is this which unavoidably shapes the outlook of Christians on practical and social issues. **Peter Doran** (Queen's University Belfast) took Michel Foucault as an example of somebody thoroughly opposed to religion in its dominant institutionalised form, but who saw the importance of a connection with the self through the earth that could be engaged with through spiritual practice.

**Questions** that followed ranged from the challenge of population growth, the historical responsibility of Christianity for oppressive social practices, and the extent to which Christianity really could offer an ecological ethic that was in line with Green political thinking. Though there were naturally conflicting positions on all of these issues (with the challenge of population growth proving particularly contentious), there was general agreement that failure to resist the temptation to oppress through power has been common to any segment of society that has been dominant. There was also consensus on the fact that the Christian church has not addressed environmental challenges with the vigour apposite to the theological and ethical resources inherent within it.

To this end, Nuala Ahern made a closing plea to all groups represented on the panel to make a real effort to bring their communities into more positive engagement with those environmental and social problems that are, after all, not simply 'Green issues' but pressing concerns for all people. John Barry ended the event by reiterating his thanks to all participants, and made a call for the discussion to be continued with other similar events and greater numbers in attendance.

***Matt Williams***

***14 July 2016***

***This event is made possible with the financial support of  
the European Parliament to Green European Foundation.***