“How the concept of Ideology passed from meaning “science of ideas” and “analysis of the origin of ideas” to meaning a specific “system of ideas” needs to be examined historically. In purely logical terms the process is easy to grasp and understand. […]

It seems to me that there is a potential element of error in assessing the value of ideologies, due to the fact (by no means casual) that the name ideology is given both to the necessary superstructure of a particular structure and to the arbitrary elucubrations of particular individuals. The bad sense of the word has become widespread, with the effect that the theoretical analysis of the concept of ideology has been modified and denatured. The process leading up to this error can be easily reconstructed: 1. ideology is identified as distinct from the structure, and it is asserted that it is not ideology that changes the structures but vice versa; 2. it is asserted that a given political solution is “ideological”—i.e. that it is not sufficient to change the structure, although it thinks that it can do so; it is asserted that it is useless, stupid, etc.; 3. one then passes to the assertion that every ideology is “pure” appearance, useless, stupid, etc.

One must therefore distinguish between historically organic ideologies, those, that is, which are necessary to a given structure, and ideologies that are arbitrary, rationalistic, or “willed”. To the extent that ideologies are historically necessary they have a validity which is “psychological”; they “organise” human masses, and create the terrain on which men move, acquire consciousness of their position, struggle, etc. To the extent that they are arbitrary they only create individual “movements”, polemics and so on (though even these are not completely useless, since they function like an error which by contrasting with truth, demonstrates it). It is worth recalling the frequent affirmation made by Marx on the “solidity of popular beliefs” as a necessary element of a specific situation. What he says more or less is “when this way of conceiving things has the force of popular beliefs”, etc. Another proposition of Marx is that a popular conviction often has the same energy as a material force or something of the kind, which is extremely significant. The analysis of these propositions tends, I think, to reinforce the conception of historical bloc in which precisely material forces are the content and ideologies are the form, though this distinction between form and content has purely didactic value, since the material forces would be inconceivable historically without form and the ideologies would be individual fancies without the material forces” (Gramsi, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, <http://abahlali.org/files/gramsci.pdf>, pp 705-7)

“But at this point we reach the fundamental problem facing any conception of the world, any philosophy which has become a cultural movement, a “religion”, a “faith”, any that has produced a form of practical activity or will in which the philosophy is contained as an implicit theoretical “premise”. One might say “ideology” here, but on condition that the word is used in its highest sense of a conception of the world that is implicitly manifest in art, in law, in economic activity and in all manifestations of individual and collective life. This problem is that of preserving the ideological unity of the entire social bloc which that ideology serves to cement and to unify. The strength of religions, and of the Catholic church in particular, has lain, and still lies, in the fact that they feel very strongly the need for the doctrinal unity of the whole mass of the faithful and strive to ensure that the higher intellectual stratum does not get separated from the lower” (op.cit., p. 634).

“Religion and common sense cannot constitute an intellectual order, because they cannot be reduced to unity and coherence even within an individual consciousness, let alone collective consciousness. Or rather they cannot be so reduced “freely”—for this may be done by “authoritarian” means, and indeed within limits this has been done in the past. Note the problem of religion taken not in the confessional sense but in the secular sense of a unity of faith between a conception of the world and a corresponding norm of conduct. But why call this unity of faith “religion” and not “ideology”, or even frankly “politics”?” (op.cit. p. 631)

“It is essential to destroy the widespread prejudice that philosophy is a strange and difficult thing just because it is the specific intellectual activity of a particular category of specialists or of professional and systematic philosophers. It must first be shown that all men are “philosophers”, by defining the limits and characteristics of the “spontaneous philosophy” which is proper to everybody. This philosophy is contained in: 1. language itself, which is a totality of determined notions and concepts and not just of words grammatically devoid of content; 2. “common sense” and “good sense”;1 3. popular religion and, therefore, also in the entire system of beliefs, superstitions, opinions, ways of seeing things and of acting, which surface collectively under the name of “folklore”. […]In the most immediate and relevant sense, one cannot be a philosopher, by which I mean have a critical and coherent conception of the world, without having a consciousness of its historicity, of the phase of development which it represents and of the fact that it contradicts other conceptions or elements of other conceptions.” (op. cit., p. 626-8)

“Indeed, if such a conviction did not exist, men would not act, they would not create new history, philosophies would not become ideologies and would not in practice assume the fanatical granite compactness of the “popular beliefs” which assume the same energy as “material forces””. (op. cit., p. 747)

“References to common sense and to the solidity of its beliefs are frequent in Marx. But Marx is referring not to the validity of the content of these beliefs but rather to their formal solidity and to the consequent imperative character they have when they produce norms of conduct. There is, further, implicit in these references an assertion of the necessity for new popular beliefs, that is to say a new common sense and with it a new culture and a new philosophy which will be rooted in the popular consciousness with the same solidity and imperative quality as traditional beliefs”. (op. cit., p. 775-6)

**QUESTIONS (choose one)**

1. Which conception of ideology does Gramsci strongly criticize in the first excerpt?
2. In which respect, according to Gramsci, religion is the model of ideology? Does this idea differ from that of Marx?
3. How does Gramsci’s concept of “common sense” contribute to his conception of ideology?