

# KARL MARX'S PERSPECTIVE ON RELIGION: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS

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## Abstract

Karl Marx, one of the most influential thinkers of the 19th century, offered a critical examination of religion within the framework of his broader socio-economic theories. This article explores Marx's ideas on religion, examining his views on its origins, functions, and implications within capitalist societies. This article aims to shed light on Marx's critique of religion as a tool of social control and as an opium of the masses. Furthermore, it discusses the relevance of Marx's ideas on religion in contemporary society. *Religion has been destructively criticized and is still passing through criticisms. This is due largely to the sufferings and devastated situations humanity has passed through over the centuries as a result of many wars caused or justified by religion. Karl Marx regards religion as a source of untold misery to the human race. To achieve this objective, evaluative method was adopted. Religion laid the foundations of formal education and library system, university institutions, the cultural foundations of Europe, Arab and numerous countries of the world. It also contributed to scientific discoveries and technological innovations. Religion laid the foundation for the sanctity of human life, fundamental equality of all men, man's liberty, anti-slavery and abolitionist attitude, religious freedom, domestic stability and favourable attitude to work. The study recommends that religious leaders should as a matter of urgency and commitment review the tenets and creeds of their religions and get rid of anything that tends to erode their cherished value of human development and focus more on their works of helping humanity rather than exploiting.*

**Keywords:** Religion, Capitalism, Critique, Socio-economic theories, Humanity, Exploitation

## Introduction:

Karl Marx, a towering figure in the realm of political philosophy and social theory, dedicated a considerable portion of his work to the critique of religion. Marx approached religion not merely as a matter of personal belief, but as a socio-economic phenomenon deeply intertwined with the structures of power and exploitation within capitalist societies. His analysis of religion provided insights into its origins, functions, and implications for the broader socio-political landscape. This article aims to delve into Marx's perspective on religion, examining key themes such as its role in maintaining social order, its relationship with capitalism, and its potential for emancipatory transformation.

The history of religion can be traced to the ancient world. It can be traced to some religions such as Orphism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, African Traditional Religions and so on. Religion, no doubt is a basis of societal order. It is a belief in a supernatural being which can influence one's behaviour. Religion enables us to play some roles in the society which include shaping the life style of the individual that will make people live in unity. Religion also functions as an account of the wonders or mysteries in nature. Religion is important because it gives the individual that consciousness of living a moral life in the society. Religion is one of the keys of morality which teaches us to separate what is right from what is wrong. It is a source of moral obligation which makes people to recommend that: you must live a moral life because God has commanded you to do so.

For Karl Marx, it was a tool for exploitation. At that time, the powerful and rich (bourgeoisie) used religion as a tool to exploit their workers or less privileged (proletariat), hence religion became the tool by which the bourgeoisie satisfied their egoistic desire through the labour of their workers. No wonder Karl Marx defined religion as “an opium of the people” (Marx, 1952, ix). The issue of exploitation started with the origin of religion and not with Karl Marx.

Religion is concerned about the morality of human conduct, and both presuppose human freedom and responsibility. Religion today has become a practice that leaves so much to be desired by people. Speaking from the Christian perspective, it is clear from what the new generational churches of today practice, that there is the problem of some so-called men of God, going about establishing churches with the aim of deceiving and exploiting people to enrich themselves. For this cause, this article is necessary in order to expose any false religious practices that may have informed Karl Marx's notion of religion. Again, this article is important for the purpose of transforming religion by giving it a sincere concept where morality stands as its basis.

### **Meaning of Religion**

The term **religion** (from Latin: *religio* meaning "bind, connect") denotes a set of common beliefs and practices pertaining to the supernatural (and its relationship to humanity and the cosmos), which are often codified into [prayer](#), ritual, [scriptures](#), and religious laws. These beliefs and practices are typically defined in light of a shared canonical vocabulary of venerable traditions, writings, history, and [mythology](#) ( New World Encyclopedia, 2024).

Religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden – beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them. Religion is the self-validation of a society by means of myth and ritual.

### **Origin of Religion According to Marx**

Marx's understanding of religion stemmed from his materialist conception of history, which posited that the economic base of society shaped its superstructure, including

ideologies such as religion. He argued that religion emerged as a response to material conditions, serving as a mechanism to alleviate the alienation and suffering experienced by oppressed classes under capitalism (Marx, 1952, 78). In his early work, *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, Marx famously characterized religion as the "opium of the people," suggesting that it functioned as a form of psychological comfort that dulled the pain of exploitation.

### **A Conceptual Understanding of Religion in Karl Marx's Thought**

A fruitful and comprehensive analysis of Marx's political ideas and philosophy will remain incomplete without any reference to religion because it constitutes the core aspect of Marx's materialism in historical background in particular and political philosophy in general. This research work focuses its attention on Marx analysis about religion. He defines or explains religion in the following manner. It is the considered opinion of Marx, which he formed on the basis of study of history, is that man makes religion, but religion does not make man (Marx, 1941, 91).

In other words, religion is the self-consciousness and self-feeling of man who has either not yet found himself or has already lost himself again. But man is no abstract being squatting outside the world. Man is the world of man, the state, and society. Religion is the general theory of that world, its encyclopedic compendium, its logic in a popular form. It is the fantastic realization of human essence, because the human essence has no true reality (Marx, 1935). The struggle against religion is therefore immediately the fight against the other world of which religion is the spiritual aroma. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, just as it is the spirit of a spiritless situation. It is the opium of the people.

In the above definition, Marx has stressed few points about religion which require special emphasis. In his opinion, religion has been created by man to meet his own requirements. It is not the opposite. It is secondly the fantastic realization of human essence and this has no practical existence. Religion is associated with the other world. Thirdly, it is the sigh of persons who are exploited. Finally, we refer to his famous remark. It is like a sedative. Marx calls it opium. Religion helps man to forget the real world. Persons having vested interests use religion for the attainment of their parochial and limited interests. Marx makes all these remarks about religion in the background of the role religion played in all the periods before him.

Though religion was quite active in almost all periods of European history, it was super-active during the middle Ages. Explaining Marx's stand on religion, Lenin says that religion is one of the forms of spiritual oppression. Religion is a weapon which blunts the sharpness of human intelligence and productive capacity of workers (Feuerbach, 1957). He further observes that religion teaches man to be submissive and docile. Religion is a sort of spiritual booze in which the slaves of capital drown their human image. According to Marx, common people have been taught religion to make them forgetful of the prevailing social political and economic conditions. The approach to religion adopted by the ruling class is a way of exploiting the masses of people. Marx

holds that religion must be treated as a private affair and state must not have any role in religious matter. The state should not interfere with the religious beliefs of individuals. It shall not be the business of state to encourage or discourage any religious belief. There shall be no provision of subsidy in any form to religious institutions such as church or ecclesiastical organization. The citizens shall enjoy full freedom to form or join associations according to their own belief or faith.

### **Opium of the People**

Karl Marx was a German philosopher who attempted to examine religion from an objective (scientific perspective). Marx's analysis and critique of religion "as the opium of the masses" (*Die Religion ist das Opium des Volkes*) is perhaps one of the most famous and most quoted by [theist](#) and [atheist](#) alike (Marx, 1964). Unfortunately, most of those doing the quoting don't really understand exactly what Marx meant, probably due to an incomplete understanding of Marx's general theories on economics and society.

Marx actually said very little about religion directly; in all of his writings, he hardly ever addresses religion in a systematic fashion, even though he touches on it frequently in books, speeches, and pamphlets. The reason is that his critique of religion forms simply one piece of his overall theory of society—thus, understanding his critique of religion requires some understanding of his critique of society in general.

According to Marx, religion is an expression of material realities and economic injustice. Thus, problems in religion are ultimately problems in society. Religion is not the disease, but merely a symptom. It is used by oppressors to make people feel better about the distress they experience due to being poor and exploited. This is the origin of his comment that religion is the "opium of the masses"—but as we shall see, his thoughts are much more complex than commonly portrayed (Marx, 1967). According to Marx, religion is one of those social institutions which are dependent upon the material and economic realities in a given society. It has no independent history but is instead the creature of productive forces. As Marx wrote, the religious world is but the reflex of the real world. As interesting and insightful as Marx's analysis and critiques are, they are not without their problems—historical and economic. Because of these problems, it would not be appropriate to accept Marx's ideas uncritically. Although he certainly has some important things to say about the [nature of religion](#), he can't be accepted as the last word on the subject.

### **Marx's View on Religion and Human Person**

According to Karl Marx, religion is like other social institutions in that it is dependent upon the material and economic realities in a given society. It has no independent history; instead, it is the creature of productive forces. "As Marx wrote, the religious world is but the reflex of the real world" (Marx, 1952). According to Marx, religion can only be understood in relation to other social systems and the economic structures of society. In fact, religion is only dependent upon economics, nothing else—so much so that the actual

religious doctrines are almost irrelevant. This is a functionalist interpretation of religion: understanding religion is dependent upon what social purpose religion itself serves, not the content of its beliefs.

Marx's opinion is that religion is an illusion that provides reasons and an excuse to keep society functioning just as it is. Just as capitalism takes our productive labor and alienates us from its value, religion takes our highest ideals and aspirations and alienates us from them, projecting them onto an alien and unknowable being called a god (Feuerbach, 1957).

Marx has three reasons for disliking religion.

- First, it is irrational—religion is a delusion and worship of appearances that avoids recognizing underlying reality.
- Second, religion negates all that is dignified in a human being by rendering them servile and more amenable to accepting the status quo. In the preface to his doctoral dissertation, Marx adopted as his motto the words of the Greek hero Prometheus who defied the gods to bring fire to humanity: I hate all gods, with the addition that they do not recognize man's self-consciousness as the highest divinity.
- Third, religion is hypocritical. Although it might profess valuable principles, it sides with the oppressors. Jesus advocated helping the poor, but the Christian church merged with the oppressive Roman state, taking part in the enslavement of people for centuries. In the middle era, the [Catholic Church](#) preached about heaven but acquired as much property and power as possible (Marx, 1962).

### Religion as Class Ideology

This section deals with how and in what sense Marx considered religion as a class ideology. The term class ideology means that religion is held or practiced by a class and the religious beliefs flourish within the class structure. In this regard, there is a lot of controversy. It is due to the fact that the definitions of class and religion do not always suit class ideology. For example, the primitive tribal people had their own religion, but the tribal communities were not classes in the Marxian sense because Marx used the concept in a special sense. Moreover, his definition of religion is not applicable to the religion of tribal communities (Marx, 1932).

There are two broad aspects of Marx's concept of religion. The advent and development of religion is due to the ignorance of man to understand the natural phenomena and their incapacity to solve his problems. When these two are overcome the importance and even the existence of religion will be in danger. The German philosophers, Feuerbach and Hegel viewed religion as fantasy of alienated man and Marx subscribed to this view. The alienated man being **unable to live a full and satisfying life seeks compensation for his incapacity (Burns, 1935)**. The above two elements of Marx's doctrine of religion are not compatible with class ideology. Religion interpreted by Marx is not practiced by any particular class. But in spite of this, his doctrine of religion can be called a class ideology.

**In attesting to this claim, Plamenatz argues that** these doctrines are compatible with the belief that it is so (that is, it's a class ideology-added). For religion, on either of these

views, can be held to be a cement holding society together, and if society is divided into classes, some of which exploit others, it is cement which helps to make this exploitation possible (Burns, 1932). All the classes use religion, of course, for different purposes. Both the exploiters and exploited will use religious beliefs. It may be that any one class does not believe in religion, but uses it as a weapon for the attainment of any cherished goal. In a capitalist society, the exploiting class with the help of religion exploits the proletariat. The working class practices religion and that helps the members to be united.

In the middle age, the powerful class used religion that is Christianity to exploit the common people. The feudal landlords, the priests and many other influential persons used religion for the simple purpose of exploitation. Common people were taught that the life of the other world was more covetable and desirable and for that life, they should ignore this mortal world and abide by the sermons of the pope and other priests of the church. This was the way of strengthening their control over the community. On the other hand, common people out of the fear of punishment and to get rid of the wrath of God showed unconditional obligation to the church.

The religious beliefs practiced by different people before Marx was quite alive in his mind and in the background of that he drew certain conclusions. In fact, religion of his time can be called a class ideology, because no class was quite free from the influence of religion. Moreover, each class had its own approach to religion though, in broadest term, the religion of all classes was the same.

### **Religion as a Tool of Social Control**

Central to Marx's critique of religion was its role in maintaining the status quo and perpetuating social inequality. He contended that religious institutions, by promoting otherworldly salvation and divine providence, diverted attention away from the material conditions of oppression and exploitation. Moreover, Marx argued that religious ideologies often served the interests of the ruling class by legitimizing existing power structures and discouraging dissent. Through rituals, doctrines, and moral codes, religion reinforced obedience and conformity among the masses, thus bolstering the stability of the capitalist order.

### **Capitalism and the Fetishism of Commodities:**

In his analysis of capitalism, Marx identified parallels between religious beliefs and the fetishism of commodities—the tendency to attribute mystical qualities to material objects. He argued that under capitalism, commodities assumed a fetishistic character, whereby their exchange value obscured the social relations of production that underpinned their creation. This fetishism, Marx contended, mirrored the religious mystification of social reality, wherein abstract concepts such as money and capital acquired quasi-divine attributes. Thus, religion and capitalism were intertwined in their ability to obscure the true nature of exploitation and alienation.

### **The Potential for Emancipatory Transformation:**

Despite his critique of religion as a tool of oppression, Marx recognized its potential for emancipatory transformation. He viewed religious movements, particularly those rooted in liberation theology, as expressions of resistance against capitalist exploitation. Marx believed that religion, when harnessed in the service of social justice and collective liberation, could mobilize the oppressed masses and challenge the hegemony of the ruling class. Moreover, he envisioned a future communist society in which religion would naturally wither away as the material conditions of existence were transformed, rendering the need for spiritual consolation obsolete.

### **Relevance in Contemporary Society:**

The relevance of Marx's ideas on religion extends beyond the historical context of 19th-century capitalism. In an era marked by global capitalism, widening economic inequality, and social unrest, Marx's critique offers valuable insights into the enduring relationship between religion and power. From the rise of fundamentalist movements to the commodification of spirituality, contemporary manifestations of religion continue to intersect with the dynamics of class struggle and social control. By engaging with Marx's analysis, scholars and activists can critically assess the role of religion in perpetuating or challenging systems of oppression.

### **Evaluation**

Marx's theory of religion is faced with few criticisms. First of all, it is true that with the progress of science the influence of religion will disappear. Science and technology in the twenty-first century have reached a stage of unprecedented growth, but still there is influence of religion. It is true that today's people are not orthodox in their attitude to religion, but they are not absolutely unreligious or atheists.

Again, another problem is his claim that religion is wholly determined by material and economic realities. Not only is nothing else fundamental enough to influence religion, but influence cannot run in the other direction, from religion to material and economic realities. This is not true. If Marx were right, then capitalism would appear in countries prior to Protestantism because Protestantism is the religious system created by capitalism—but this is not found. The Reformation came to 16th century Germany which was still feudal in nature; real capitalism did not appear until the 19th century. This caused Max Weber to theorize that religious institutions end up creating new economic realities. Even if Weber is wrong, one sees that one can argue just the opposite of Marx with clear historical evidence (Michele, 1983).

It is not correct to hold that religion is the fantasy of alienated man. In the previous section, it was seen that even the privileged and educated people of sophisticated societies practice religion, but how are these people alienated? If these people are alienated then the concept requires to be redefined. There is no such scope.

Few more words may be said in support of Marx. While Marx was writing about religion, the position and influence of religion of Middle Ages was highly active in his mind. The

students of Western political thought are quite aware of the all-pervading influence of Christianity in general and church in particular over all sections of society.

As interesting and insightful as Marx's analysis and critiques are, they are not without their problems—both historical and economic. Because of these problems, it would not be appropriate to accept Marx's ideas uncritically. Although he certainly has some important things to say about the [nature of religion](#), he can't be accepted as the last word on the subject.

From the above analysis, it is crystal clear that religion, according to Marx, is sought in the real conditions of man's empirical life and in the class conflicts that occur in society, and not in his essence. And if these conditions are such that they generate certain kinds of emotional conflicts and theoretical illusions, then these illusions and conflicts must be removed by removing that which gives rise to them. If Feuerbach claimed to have discovered the secret of theology in anthropology, Marx sought to transform anthropology into realistic sociology.

#### **Conclusion:**

Karl Marx's perspective on religion provides a nuanced understanding of its socio-economic functions and implications within capitalist societies. By examining religion as a product of material conditions and a tool of social control, Marx sheds light on its complex relationship with power and exploitation. While critiquing religion's role in maintaining the status quo, Marx also acknowledges its potential for transformative resistance. In contemporary society, Marx's insights remain relevant for scholars and activists seeking to understand and confront the intersections of religion, capitalism, and social justice.

Marx's labor theory of value and concept of surplus value as driving exploitation in capitalism are the fundamental underpinning upon which all of the rest of his ideas are based. Without them, his moral complaint against capitalism falters, and the rest of his philosophy begins to crumble. Thus, his analysis of religion becomes difficult to defend or apply, at least in the simplistic form he describes it. (Carr, 1934)

Marxists have tried valiantly to refute those critiques or revise Marx's ideas to render them immune to the problems described above, but they haven't entirely succeeded (although they certainly disagree—otherwise they wouldn't still be Marxists). Fortunately, we are not entirely limited to Marx's simplistic formulations. We do not have to restrict ourselves to the idea that religion is only dependent upon economics and nothing else, such that the actual doctrines of religions are almost irrelevant. Instead, we can recognize that there are a variety of social influences upon religion, including economic and material realities of society. By the same token, religion can, in turn, have an influence on society's economic system.

Whatever one's conclusion about the accuracy or validity of Marx's ideas on religion, we should recognize that he provided an invaluable service by forcing people to take a hard look at the social web in which religion always occurs. Because of his work, it has become impossible to [study religion](#) without also exploring its ties to various social and economic forces. People's spiritual lives can no longer be assumed to be independent of their material lives.

Although religion has been seen as a source of worry to humanity due largely to misconception and selfish interest which negates the spirit of religion, it has been clearly seen that religion as institution, has played enormous role in the sand of history in the development of humanity and made more changes on earth for good than any other institution. Religion laid the foundation of formal education, library system and university institutions. It contributed to scientific discoveries and technological innovations and advancements in intellectual culture in general.

It is worthy of note that religion fought against cannibalism, superstitious beliefs, the killing of twins, trial by ordeal, slavery and human sacrifice. It contributed so much to alleviate human misery by building hospitals, rehabilitation units and workshops to take care of the sick, motherless babies, mentally ill-destitute, the physically challenged, lepers and empowered unskilled patients to learn a trade during recovery. Professional medical nursing and Red Cross trace their origin to religion. Religion laid the foundations for the sanctity of human life, the fundamental equality of all men, man's liberty, antislavery and abolitionist attitude, religious freedom, domestic stability and favourable attitude to work.

In view of the reality of the positive and essential role of religion to human development, the study recommends that religious leaders should as a matter of urgency and commitment review the tenets and creeds of their religions and get rid of anything that tends to erode their cherished value of human development and focus more on their works of civilizing humanity.

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