

# Sociological Practicability of Marx's View on Religion: A Polemical Proclaim

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**Abstract** Ever since the emergence of sociology as a normative discipline in the social realm along with economic, political and cultural milieu, the conception of religion in society has progressively appeared as concrete form of beliefs among humans. The philosophies of classical antiquity through to structuralist-functionalist approach called for an attention towards religion as a source of social order and social control in addition to faiths or blind faiths alone. Here the controversy rises with Marx's contention of regarding religion as the "opium of the people". Marx emphasized economic issues as primary (basic structure) in the society while he puts secondary consideration (super structure) to religion that simply undermined the beliefs and value systems of human beings, particularly the underdogs and the downtrodden populace. This paper would highlight the sociological practicality on religious beliefs pointing critically at Marx's religious viewpoints. Conceptual schema and basic tenets of religious values will be interpreted using relevant theories limited to opportunity.

**Keywords** Conception of religion, Form of beliefs, Opium of the people, Polemics, Value systems

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Assessment on Marx's Religious Viewpoints Recounting Class War in Society

While depicting a kind of similarity indicating Marx's empathic religious views with that of Hebrew prophets, who brought in protest against religion having said that temple rituals followed by the priests as a means to sought for their own security and individual comfort instead of establishing justice in society [1]. For instance, Amos an Old Testament prophet did hold parallel opinion like Marx stating that the religious and political leaders during his reign had issues with the peasant's distress from injustices. Hence, Amos challenged this wrong-doings in the way of divine intervention against governing elites and religious directives. Congruent to this assertion, Marx explicitly commended for a revolution against the *bourgeois* class.

Considering class as an ideological facet in society as opposed to religious authoritativeness, I would endeavor to appraise the distinct elucidations of Marx alongside Amos's confrontational proclivity against the mishandling of religious commandments. It might provide a competitive picture between social classes and doctrines of religion.

### 1.2. Marxian Ideology Intensifies Revolution and Change: Contradicts Abstract Idea of Religion

The political environment of 19<sup>th</sup> Century Europe influenced Karl Marx in idealizing revolution and change in society along with the contemporaneous social philosophers ideologies, particularly that of Hegelian dialectics, pragmatic roles of English economists, and the idea of French utopian socialism. The perspective of change against traditionalism can be noticed in Marx's illustrations about *Eleventh Thesis on Feuerbach* wherein he contends that 'philosophers have hitherto merely interpreted the world in various ways; the point, however, is to change it.' [2]. Although Marx's thoughts are emphatic in broader sense as is evident from his *Second Theses on Feuerbach* but he opined Hegel and Feuerbach as idealists having abstract incomplete thoughts.

Notwithstanding the *bourgeois* rationale, in contrast to other social philosophers, Marx's thoughtful ideology of revolutionary change was regarded as scientific [3]. Furthermore, Marx envisioned tracing historical antecedents that real change in society did not take place based on abstract ideas but by the "revolutionary practices" only because, the practical scenario is that it is human beings who tend to change circumstances [2]. The Marxian ideology which apparently called for collectivism textured through revolution evidently would culminate to socialism and communism. Hence, Marx aptly enunciated that society does not consist of individuals alone; rather it expresses the sum of their interrelations, the relations within which these individuals stand for their cause that is reflective of revolution and change [4].

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## 2. Marx Claims Unpreventable Class Contradictions Succeeding Capitalist Development

In accordance with Crompton's explications on Marx's claiming the centrality of class in society there could be little suspicion about that, since the idea of class is relatively constant. However, Marx's definition of class concept as such is precisely limited to its scope [5]. Marx used the term "subordinate gradation" to idealize class conflicts while drawing on the historical development of industrial relations (capitalist modes) that took place in ancient Rome and transcended to culture and civilizations across different epochs in human history [6]. Here, two distinct classes placing themselves at the social hierarchy wherein the uppermost classes are being served by the subordinates as a rule of gradation in society. Even in a state of declining the system of hierarchy, consequentially a new and similar structure of subordinate gradation likely to emerge as 'class contradictions'.

In the realm of class distinction, Marx described and analyzed the contrasting roles of the *bourgeois* and *proletariat* in capitalist mode of production [5]. In a capitalist economy, the exploitative nature of *bourgeois* over the *proletariat* both on material and natural resources implicit as the coverings of religious and political misapprehensions. Nonetheless, the *proletarians* live on work only, which depend on their labor inputs increasing worthwhile capital for the *bourgeois*.

Contextually, referring to the complaints of Amos who observed the ruling class of his ecclesiastical era that reached the height of affluence and richness led a luxury living against the poor subjects. The general masses of the poor were fated to poverty and sense of alienation. This can be regarded as the pessimism of religious values and class ideologies between ruling elite and the poor.<sup>1</sup>

The Old Testament prophet Amos illustrated further on the roles of ruling class who has the authority to control all embracing power in the society regardless of religious, political and economic affairs. In line with monarchical authoritarianism, this class of governing elite predominantly consisted of the political and religious leaders including royal family members and the high priests.<sup>2</sup> Similar to that of Marx, it has been perceived that the ruling elites gradually growing wealthier at the cost of peasant's toiling labors even beyond their usual crop productions; and as such they were further compelled to captivate in producing luxury commodities for marketing and for exporting, e. g., wine and

oil.<sup>3</sup> The foregoing expressions of religious freethinking intuitively supportive to the Marx's class contradictions alongside religious presumption. Taking into account, the cultural attributes in the religious belief system that is deep-rooted in the social structure, should be anticipated in a limited scale for its application and enormity.

## 3. Critical Appraisal of Religion Hints Social Class as Super Structural Manifestation

In most religions of the world, the abstract ideas of the terms or concepts corresponding to spirituality, divinity, beliefs and sacred notions etc., connote only complex meanings and understandings in cultural milieu. Hence, the essence of religious thought can be simplified as a kind of discourse or practice in human society and culture encompassing its perspective to inanimate or non-human abstraction [7].

Religion turned to be problematic in Europe with the co-existence between Christianity and Judaism (Christians and Jews) wherein the supremacy of Christianity over Judaism staged firm to proclaim. It is hypothetically conclusive that the religious freedom of the Jews seemed to be narrow and thus constricted. Arguing on the similar ground, the apparently negated religion towards the *Jewish Question* can stimulate generous scope for criticism. In this context, Marx mentioned that America as a highly democratic and constitutionally secular nation which even proved to be essentially and ultra-religious in its choice and persuasions. Marx deliberated the existence of religion in a state as a symptom of complications and not the cause of the problems. He further asserted that religion is for all intents and purposes, the imperceptible rights of the people in acquiring self-consciousness and self-awareness. This is realistically an abstract sensitivity of individual in a state or society which called for presupposition of all criticisms [8]. Additionally, Marx while appreciating the awakening of the consciousness of human beings in his works '*The German Ideology*' ascertained that unlike German philosophy, his ideas of consciousness are dealt with realism. Therefore, the individuals' lives in society are not determined by consciousness, instead the consciousness is determined by individuals in society in compliance with real life situations [9].

Some of the opinions put forward by Marx as visualized in his *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right* that religion is the complaint of the oppressed human existences as good as that of the heart of a heartless and the soul of soulless conditions. As such, Marx convincingly viewed religion as the opium of the people [8]. Subsequently, it emphasized the

<sup>1</sup> Amos, the first Hebrew prophet having a biblical book named after him (8th century BC) who pointed out the distinctive religious values and privileges between the rulers and the ruled.

<sup>2</sup> Amos contended that under the monarchical rule, the political and religious leaders predominantly belonged to the royal family members.

<sup>3</sup> With reference to Marx's views on exploitative nature of ruling class over the working class, Amos indicated that the elite class of his time got richer at the cost of the compulsive labor of the toiling masses.

role of proletariat in dialectical elevation against religious directives in the then social structure [10]. Before the French Revolution, the distinct class system existed for maintaining the status quo and social order in the state as power delegated to the elites. The class structure (known as Estate System) in pre-French Revolution was composed of the Clergymen (the First Estate), nobility groups (the Second Estate), and humble commoners (the Third Estate). While following the French Estate system, Marx succinctly observed religion as the super structure of the society given its reflective but abstract roles as the critical part of the problem it runs through [11]. Such a super structural prominence of religion like other nonconcrete forms of thought patterns echoes the monarchical rules of extreme authoritarianism, though passionately supported in favor of establishing a just society by Amos.<sup>4</sup> In consort with the place of worship, all forms of singularities together with art, philosophy, law, culture, literature, architecture, music, politics, economics, engineering, and medicine indisputably reduced to a symbol of corruption and injustice. This is how the super structural construct appears as evil religion contradicting opposing classes in society.

#### 4. Reflections of Religious Exercise as Polemical

The historical basis of economics as theorized by Marx has got its weakness in Durkheim's [12] appraisal of the *Essays on the Materialist Conception of History* [13]. Referring to the works of notable sociologist Durkheim's *Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, Labriola, however, constructs a case pointing out religion as one of the most primitive practices compared to other social wonders. From this consideration, it can be deduced that the religious practices also tend to be instrumental in encouraging other material beings of the society.

Marx addresses that masses can be inclined to get along with specific culture for their lifelong learning process. If this cultural practice brings about changes in society through confronting the coexisting social problems, then religion will ultimately prove to be superfluous. To comprehend the role, application and efficacy of religion in the western culture contrary to under-developed societies we tend to observe the relative absence of full employment, justice, health care, food, education, welfare, housing, transportation, electricity, water etc. Therefore, the mass of people innately consider religion as "opium" to get relief from their usual sufferings of haves-not condition. Consequently, it may turn into negative brawl in some instances in providing empowerment and autonomy and hence religious bigotry can be conceptualized instead of radicalness.

Against such declining phase or spirit of religion, a variety of social problems emerged together with the advancement of western societies having highly consumerist economic inspirations. These problems encompass almost all spheres of socio-economic lives and cultures indicating the discontents of human civilization. Social problems include depression (both economic and mental), racial discrimination, unemployment and underemployment, cybercrimes and warfare, acts of terrorism, inadequate care for the elderly populace, growing obesity, incomprehension of hunger, deviant behaviors and addiction, increasing rates of suicide, environmental pollutions, adverse effects of global warming, lack of social mobility, and above all, involuntary movement of people due to deadly war resulting to severe refugee crisis. Despite consistent economic growth and developments in the western world, all above-mentioned societal issues are persisting unequivocally. In a bid to explicate the concomitance of religion and modernity, the core of the problem, therefore, remains in essence, polemical.

#### 5. Theoretical Context

The concept of alienation (self-estrangement) of an individual particularly in a capitalist mode of production was one of the central thoughts of Karl Marx's notion of exploitation and conflicts in society. The root cause of the deprivation of workers and wage-laborers eventuated through the private ownership and absolute control over property. The capital formation took place only by misappropriating the exact volume of productions and distributions of goods and services by the toiling masses as wage earners. In the context, Marx views religion primarily as the effect of alienation in its basic forms, contents and applications. Amidst all traits of collective social lives, the background thoughts and understandings of religion influenced Marx because of his awareness to exploitative social structures. In probing his notion of religion, how Marx accentuated the sociological and philosophical contents as two definitive directions to ameliorate the viability of theoretical premise.

##### 5.1. Marx's Notions of Religion: Sociological Perspective

Marx's conception of religion is presumably formed in accordance with the social settings of that particular society wherein he grew and got experience over the years. He perceived religion as the outcome of laborers state of being alienated in the production level under capitalist economic structure. Based on the observation of facts, Marx regarded this specific condition of the labor force as the degrading effects of human values in the extreme form of disparity within the economic order in European societies at that critical juncture. Class cleavages and contradictions appeared to gravity because of the dehumanizing consequence (laborers are turned to like mechanical instruments) which grown out of the impact of alienation

<sup>4</sup> Amos tended to support in establishing a rational society against the authoritarianism of Monarchy appreciating religion as the super structural phenomenon similar to that of Karl Marx.

itself. This was how the *bourgeois* owned and controlled the means of production and distribution in the expansion of capitalist entrepreneurship [13]. It is sociologically significant to look into the profit motivation zeal of the *bourgeois* class that evidently sourced to alienation affecting both the workers and the general masses in the society. The religion has come to term for analyses by Marx while the alienated status of workers called for attention in regard to enslavement status to the *bourgeois* and powerlessness status in the factory or industry. In such a frame of reference as to the worker's deep alienated status in society, the roles of religion might have hoisted for some kind of salvation or protection to the industrial laborers [15]. This background commencement of the roles of religion prompted Marx to come forward with his steadfast notions of religion in capitalist society in particular.

## 5.2. Marx's Notions of Religion: Philosophical Perspective

While looking into philosophical analogy, it can be deduced that Marx's general thought patterns are profoundly wavered by the historical contributions of two illustrious German philosophers Hegel and Feuerbach. The historical materialism idealized by Marx as the central point of successive social development, which was originally postulated by Hegel indicating the idea of dialectical process of social change that occurred in the realm of human society and civilization. Such dialectical viewpoints ought to raise irreconcilable conflicts wherein new ideas and concepts are created for the basic foundation headed for a change in society [16]. Society is the outcome of ideas or conversely ideas of human beings create society. On a similar count, religion is also the product of ideas progressed along with the successive developments of humanities. Conflicting religious ideas too can be the source of alienation in society. In the context, Hegel put up with his idea that religion in essence, can be the originator of alienation against Marx's idea of powerlessness in production level given its false hope and promise of rewards in the other world hereafter. To note that, Marx's elucidation of religion based on historical stride and class contradictions thought to be credited with the Hegelian conception of dialectical materialism. In terms of social change, Marx's pre-conceived notions of economic issues get *prima-facie* importance hence declining the ideas or thoughts as the cardinal determinants in society as advocated by Hegel. Though influenced by Hegel and did not neglect Hegelian dialectical relationships completely, it revealed that Marx's economic consideration superseded Hegel's ideological encounters as the basis of social change directing at religious contemplation [16].

Another German philosopher Feuerbach, a non-believer, complemented atheistic works on religious indictment which fascinated Marx in conceptualizing materialistic notion of human-social living. Through to materialistic idea of human life, Marx concluded his perception of religion as the productive output of self-alienated human beings in society.

Religion, as Feuerbach pronounced in his book *The Essence of Christianity* that it's being wished-for any individual's maximum aspiration of life in the universe. It addressed an individual's state of alienation mystifying the vision of spirituality. Further to this appropriation, Feuerbach sensed that human spirit and ambitions are as good as God's grace. This was how religion destined to appear as the distancing of individual from the self [17]. The self-alienation of man which was grown out of religion turned him with the lack of self-consciousness too. In order to overcome this weakness of individual can be actualized through de-alienating himself while attaining necessary education and intensifying the path of enlightenment as proposed by Feuerbach. Though Marx accepted Feuerbach's atheistic justification of religion in principle, he, however, criticized Feuerbach for his inadequate thoughtfulness to social explanations that people tend to comply with the conditions prevailing in the universe [15]. Based on Hegel and Feuerbach's philosophical analyses of religion, Marx advanced his theory of alienation facing sociological consequences and religious indictment as well as abstraction in society branding it as the 'opium of the people'.

## 6. Discussions

Theoretical basis of Marx's interpretations on religion can be traced through manifold sources of learned escalations which include moral, economical, historical, anthropological, philosophical, political and social thoughts. A critique on Marx's religious ideas prefigured as inconsistent, complex and ambiguous versions which is far from people's innate expectations of day to day life [16]. Because of the enormity, disparities, and supposedly uncertainties Marx's viewpoints of religion has been misapprehended and blemished [18]. On the similar count, it is a commonplace to regard that Karl Marx holds certain elements of biases given his full emphases on economic functions of discrepancies in society over religious beliefs indicating class discrepancies and exploitations as cardinal forces.

Again, Marx's proposition of religion as the '*opium of the people*'<sup>5</sup> which is directing at the proletariats and the underdogs' populace in society that they are the prey of economic dispossessions in this material world seemingly justifying the false hope of gaining best of everything in their eternal lives hereafter. The economic history of mankind provide pace for the people with their existing state of affairs that is symbolic in maintaining respective status and positions of every individuals. In view of making religious outlets to the facts, Marx theorizes religion as a kind of illusory functions in society and so to say the fantasies for the marginalized people marking it as irrational (more

<sup>5</sup> Austin Cline widely has contributed to the issues of religion on atheism and agnosticism, while Karl Marx attempted to examine religion from the point of objectivity. To note that Marx's critique of 'religion is the opium of the masses' considered very illustrious as quoted by theist and atheist who probably lacked in understanding Marx's general theory of socioeconomic history.

importance of worship than economic realities), it disregards self-consciousness (lack or absence of individual status) and hence it is hypocritical (since it favors the authoritarians) in essence.

## 7. Conclusions

The basic notions of the Marx's conception of religion originally came to term with the historical materialist campaigners. Later, the socio-genic facts of cultural traits and complexes dominated the collective religious outgrowths harmonizing with beliefs and faiths in spirituality and mysticism. In the core of interpretations, therefore, religion cannot grow in isolation rather it adheres to the socio-cultural context of relevance. Marx enunciated religion as the super structural phenomenon in the society that prudently relates to cultural milieu only. Such illustrious facts of socio-cultural evenness with religious beliefs can intensely form social relationships corresponding to the social structures of any specific regions (beyond economic considerations) [19]. The variability of religious beliefs and practices is not uncommon to many communities. For example, caste system in India has its root in religion only, but the system itself is extremely hierarchical and exploitative in nature. It has relevance to Marx's class contradictions which can be observed through the ordeal of the under-privileged and the oppressed groups of people by the heavy-handed privileged classes in Indian society.

Sociological illustrations and analyses of Marx's religious theorization suggest that a degree of acceptance and viability of religion in society cannot be ignored or obliterated altogether. The logic of economic deprivations and deceitful optimisms for the future lives have certainly impacted upon the masses of people who are economically and politically devoid of desired opportunities as their civil rights are unreceptively constrained. But nevertheless, beliefs in supernatural power, faith in divinity or in theological idioms of eternity, a great majority of the people around the world, no matter they are either from developed or underdeveloped nations, are bounded by religious spirits of optimism. This could be adhered to "Us and Them" or "We and They" or "Ours and Theirs" feeling of identities even beyond dogmatic religious directives conceded to symbolical interactionism [20-22]. Symbolic attitudes of such kinds prevail in every society which is sociologically significant. Marx's religious conviction of negativity contradicts the basic trends of belief system even without substantiating the practicing religious groups and communities. It would not be unjustifiable presumptions to concede Marx's religious perspectives as a polemical proclaim given its objective and subjective illuminations of successive economic history of mankind and development of comparative religions with prospects and discontents.

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