



## THE THEORY OF ALIENATION BY KARL MARX AND HIS CRITIQUE OF RELIGION: AN INTROSPECTION

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### **Abstract:**

Karl Marx found in religion the consequence of “*Entausserung*” or alienation created by the capitalist mode of production. For Max Weber, religion is an impetus for social change, while for Marx it is a force trying desperately to preserve the status quo. Refuting Adam Smith, Marx established that division of labour alienated the proletariat from their “*essence*”. Capitalism later developed a laissez-faire individualism that created fatal cleavage in the human consciousness. Marx revised the Hegelian idea of “*Entausserung*” that was earlier refuted by Feuerbach for being metaphysical. A minute observation of the language and imagery, Marx uses about religion, reveals comprehensive morphological, semantic and stylistic resonance of Feuerbach although Marx criticized Feuerbach as his theory ignored economic and social perspectives. This paper tries to analyse the language of different texts of Marx to decipher how he gradually relates his theory of alienation to his unique theory of religion in a dialectic complex process and finally establishes religion, not as an illusion, but to be an intrinsic part of the “*superstructure*”. Instead of simple abolition of religion, Marx demands extinction of that very vulnerable human psyche that receives religious “reflex of the real world” in “*Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Volume I*”. A close scrutiny the text of “*Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts*” reveals that while discussing the different types of alienation, Marx, initially uses religion simply as an allegory, with gradual and conscious change of emphasis. Here Marx does not put religion in a direct causal relationship to alienation of labour; he just uses religion as an analogy, just to make his point clear. Significantly, Marx almost echoes the logical and linguistic pattern of Feuerbachian proposition. If we again compare minutely the language and imagery Marx uses, we find interesting and comprehensive morphological, semantic and stylistic resonance of Feuerbach. While discussing alienation from the ‘species-being’, Marx again refers to religion, not just as an illusion,

here he refers to religion significantly to be consciously created by mankind. Marx makes his discrete critique on the history of religion and its developing relation with different modes of production. Moreover, we should observe the subtle terminology Marx uses very cautiously "*The religious world is but the reflex of the real world*", "*The religious reflex of the real world*" he carefully selects the word "*Reflex*" not influence, inspiration or stimulus. That is why he takes religious issues so seriously, and a more minute understanding of the text will reveal that he is not at all bothered with abolition of religion, rather he wants extinction of the "*religious reflex of the real world*", and to be more specific he wants abolition of that very vulnerable state of human mind that receives such "*reflexes*". Moreover, here Marx first discovers Protestant reformation was the "*most fitting form of religion*" for bourgeois mode of production to develop. In "*Capital*" Marx is so much distressed with religion that is not hesitant to declare religion to be as devastating as war in terms of economic wastage. The developing pattern of the language, Marx uses, regarding religion is scrutinized in this paper.

**Keywords:** Karl Marx, alienation; humanism; religion

## 1. Introduction

According to Karl Marks, religion is the by-product of alienation created by capitalist mode of production. Rapid industrialisation has created division of labour that eventually alienated man from his essence that is his labour. In the earlier form of production a worker had a control over the product, he created, and that is his essence. But the new mode of production has robbed him of his essence, because he is in no control of the products he is preparing<sup>1</sup>. He is not actually making a complete product; in fact he is making a very small part of the product. Therefore, he does not have any idea of the production process that makes him alienated from his essence.<sup>2</sup> Moreover growing competition in the capitalist system has created alienation among the proletariat. It is this insecurity, which is the breeding ground of alienation for Karl Marx<sup>3</sup>.

What religion offers for the oppressed is just an escape, according to Marx<sup>4</sup>. Religion has to offer something better even for those who does the act of oppression. Religion creates a false ideology among everybody that everything is maintained by God, he will take care of us, and we should not disturb the status quo, God has created. It is the wish of the God that the rich and the poor should maintain their own position. Therefore, the social principles of Christian religion glorify the slavery of antiquity, serfdom of the middle ages and proletariat of the modern time. It also justifies the oppression of the ruling class as the just punishment of the original sin

or the like. It in fact preaches and promotes cowardice and submission. Feuerbach and Hegel discovered the basic fault of Christian theology, both of them referred to all human qualities as divine or related to God, when they should have talked about humanity at large and nothing else.

Christian theology separates us from all that are good qualities of human being—love, beauty, kindness and attributes all them to heaven. Hegel also objectifies reason, freedom, goodness and claims that these are expressions of some heavenly absolute.<sup>5</sup> Yet these are all basic features of human nature and there is nothing spiritual about it. Thus Christian theology and Hegel both make the same mistake, they alienate human consciousness and assign it to some heavenly absolute or God. These arguments of Feuerbach convinced Marx. In his own *“Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right: Introduction”* written a year after Feuerbach’s book, Marx analysed:

*“Man, who has found only the reflection of himself in the fantastic reality of heaven, where he sought a superman, will no longer feel disposed to find the mere appearance of himself, the non-man [Unmensch], where he seeks and must seek his true reality”.*<sup>6</sup>

He then added:

*“Man makes religion, religion does not make man. Religion is indeed man’s self-consciousness and self-awareness so long as he has not found himself or has already lost himself again. But, man is no abstract being squatting outside the world. Man is the world of man – state, society. This state and this society produce religion, which is an inverted consciousness of the world, because they are an inverted world. Religion is the general theory of this world, its encyclopedic compendium, its logic in popular form, its spiritual point d’honneur, its enthusiasm, its moral sanction, its solemn complement, and its universal basis of consolation and justification. It is the fantastic realization of the human essence since the human essence has not acquired any true reality. The struggle against religion is, therefore, indirectly the struggle against that world whose spiritual aroma is religion.”*<sup>7</sup>

Marx observed religion to be an after-effect of alienated consciousness. Although Feuerbach is given the credit of finding out the relation between alienation and religion<sup>8</sup>, other thinkers like Bruno Bauer and Moses Hess actually developed the idea of religion to be the projection of human alienation. In the book *“The Essence of Christianity”* Feuerbach discussed that although in Judaism and Christianity, human created God as the projection of all his good qualities—love, wisdom, beauty etc in a very innocent way, proved to have a bad effect on humanity, because human beings started

thinking about themselves to be external to these qualities and also lacking these qualities. Thus, Feuerbach clearly framed the idea of religious alienation before the general concept of alienation was framed. Marx analysed:

*“Just as in religion the spontaneous activity of the human imagination, of the human brain and the human heart, operates independently of the individual – that is, operates on him as an alien, divine or diabolical activity—in the same way the worker’s activity is not his spontaneous activity. It belongs to another; it is the loss of his self.”<sup>9</sup>*

Marx observes that in a similar fashion, capitalism has created a cleavage in the bureaucracy, between physical labour and intellectual labour, between labourer and the products, between man and man and between man and his social position. Capitalism has developed a laissez faire individualism, that although seems positive, yet such individualism creates fatal cleavage in the human consciousness. Marx explains,

*“It is the same in religion. The more man puts into God, the less he retains in himself. The worker puts his life into the object; but now his life no longer belongs to him but to the object. Hence, the greater this activity the greater is the worker’s lack of objects. Whatever the product of his labour is, he is not. Therefore the greater this product, the less is he himself. The alienation of the worker in his product means not only that his labour becomes an object, an external existence, but that it exists outside him, independently, as something alien to him, and that it becomes a power of its own confronting him; it means that the life which he has conferred on the object confronts him as something hostile and alien.”<sup>10</sup>*

The proposition of Feuerbach could not explain why human beings agree to alienate themselves from all their good qualities to some divine infinite and admit themselves to be the original sinners. He gives a rather non-satisfactory generalised and superficial answer that it is the basic nature of human beings to be alienated, they love to be unhappy with themselves, yet happy with God. Such explanation could not satisfy Marx. He toiled a lot and tried to find out a materialistic account of human alienation in his ‘*Economic and Political Manuscripts*’ published in 1944. Marx found out a link between the politics behind religion and economic exploitation in the capitalist society. Marx significantly observes,

*“For Germany, the criticism of religion has been essentially completed, and the criticism of religion is the prerequisite of all criticism.”<sup>11</sup>*

Just as religion alienates us from all our goodness and attributes them to God, the capitalist economy alienates the proletariat from their essence, their labour, the product of their labour. The capitalist economy transforms the products of their labour into some other things by a complex process and sells them in the market to be bought and used by others. Just as religion takes away human merits and attributes them to the Gods, the capitalist mode of production alienates the essence of the proletariat in form of labour and converts them to some commodities on which the laborer has no control, they are only to be sold out in the market for the rich. Thus, religious alienation creates the expression for the proletariat for their unhappiness in the material world that develops from nothing but economic crisis, uncertainty and instability. The religious alienation is evidently the mirror image of the alienation of the material world.<sup>12</sup> Therefore it is easy to understand why religion has its strong and lasting influence over man from time immemorial. Therefore at the root, according to Marx, the birth and the development of religion has a strong economic factor. Therefore, the capitalist mode of production is the base, and politics, law and religion are the parts of the superstructure. Thus, it is the religious superstructure that aggravates the emotional bankruptcy of the alienated, unhappy proletariat class. Here we quote Marx:

*“Religious distress is at the same time the expression of real [economic] distress and the protest against real distress. 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. The abolition of religion as the illusory happiness of the people is required for their real happiness. The demand to give up the illusion about its condition is the demand to give up a condition which needs illusions”.*<sup>13</sup>

The metaphor of opium is very significant, because opium is the narcotic element that at the same time aggravates pain and creates fantasies. It is exactly equivalent to the role of religion in the life of the oppressed poor. Although the proletariat gets oppressed in the capitalist system of exploitation, the bereaved mind can escape the pain in imagining a supernatural world of divinity, where all pains cease to exist, all our sufferings disappears with a magical wonder. If they are in utter financial distress, the imagined heaven has diamonds scattered here and there. This fantastic unreality has made Marx skeptic about religion. To him being religious is not qualitatively very different from being addicted to opium, alcohol or drug. The practice of religion is nothing but promoting escapism in the psychology of the proletariat. Lenin later said,

*“Religion is a sort of spiritual booze, in which the slaves of capital drown their human image, their demand for a life more or less worthy of man.”<sup>14</sup>*

People withstand all oppression, all exploitation believing it to be consequence of their original sin or the wish of God with the ludicrous hope that such injustice will be redressed in the next life. Religion diverts human agonies towards God, where they should have worried about the injustice of their material life. Engels observes,

*“All religion, however, is nothing but the fantastic reflection in men’s minds of those external forces which control their daily life, a reflection in which the terrestrial forces assume the form of supernatural forces.”<sup>15</sup>*

But in the Marxist theory of religion that we have been discussing, so far requires special attention. What Marx has discussed in his theory of religion is not practically religion in general; Marx actually makes his comments based on Christian theology and similar religious ideas that emphasize on the belief of God and afterlife. This may be an influence of Hegel, who thought Christianity as the highest form of all religion. Although the theory of religion of Marx can pertinently be applied to Hindu theology that gives good emphasis on God and afterlife. Most of the streams of Hindu doctrine persuade man to evade the thinking of the material world, the Hindu text ‘The Gita’ suggests not to worry about your product of labour, you can only work on and on, do not look at the consequences. The Marxist explanation on the politics of religion can also be applied on Buddhist theology which suggest to enjoy the world forgetting the miseries of the present life.<sup>16</sup>

Yet Marx’s theory of religion can be challenged as it cannot be applied to a number of primitive tribal religions which do not have any doctrine of any sort of afterlife. Secondly, Marx’s theory of alienation-that he suggests to be the seed of all religions, came into being after introduction of the division of labour in the capitalist mode of production. Turner argues there is no single, dominant ideology; there is a different ideology for each class. Yet according to Marx, religion in general, whether Christian or not, is an ideology that along with arts, literature, politics and law form the superstructure of the society that depends fundamentally on the economic base of the society, i.e. if there is a change in economic life, there must be some concrete changes in the superstructure of religion<sup>17</sup>. Although Marx claims his theorems to be scientific, the fact of the matter is that it is almost impossible to examine the theory of Marxism amongst the wide diversity of religious practices around the world. Marx has proved that during the rise of capitalism at the end of feudal era, there was a decline in the Catholicism and there was a rise of protestant Christianity. Because protestant

Christianity promotes individualism that is very much required in the promotion of capitalist mode of production. But there are evidences that even after the advent of capitalism, some capitalists themselves, in some cities, e.g. cities in Italy, continued with their catholic religious belief. Marxist theory of religion cannot give suitable answers to these questions. Moreover, Marx cannot confirm that those countries or cities that adopted Protestantism did that only because the economic structure of these countries or cities changed abruptly during the rise of capitalism. As Weber here criticizes Marx saying that such conclusion of Marx are over simplistic as there are plenty of evidences in the history that literature art, politics, which Marx denotes as superstructure influenced economics, that is the base thus quite reversing the propositions of Karl Marx<sup>18</sup>. Actually religion fits in a social system as a result of several intricate networks of cause and effect, which act and react with each other in a very complex process and it cannot never be nailed down to a one dimensional Marxist explanation.

Marx's theory of religion has contributed significantly in the critical study of religion. The theory of Marx has helped scrutiny the religious and social life in general. Marx's theory of religion has helped analyse the socio-economic factors in the society that takes their expression in different practices on religion. Therefore, the practices of Buddhism and Catholicism differ in different countries and these can never be properly analysed without scrutiny of corresponding society, culture and economic background.<sup>19</sup>

The theory of religion by Marx has no significant clash with the ideas of Durkheim and Freud. Actually, Marx is not at all concerned with the individual religions and details about their customs. He agrees with James George Frazer that religion is nothing but a collection of absurd superstitious beliefs<sup>20</sup>. Yet Marx agrees with Durkheim on the point that we must investigate thoroughly the reasons behind the everlasting influence of religion over people. The idea of Marx is closer to Durkheim than Freud because Freud is more concerned about individual, rather than society or group. Although the idea of Freud is not at all at a stiff contrast since Freud believes that the development of an individual is shaped by his family and society<sup>21</sup>.

Marx is at sharp contrast with Durkheim on the point that Durkheim believes that religion is the worship of the society and no society can be imagined without a set of religious rituals<sup>22</sup>. Marx agrees with Freud on the proposition that religion develops from a false sense of insecurity within us. For Marx it is the economic insecurity and for Freud the insecurity develops in the subconscious as a result of subconscious repression. Both Marx and Freud believe that if the psychological insecurity is removed, there will be no room for religion.

Marx explains:

*“The abolition of religion as the illusory happiness of the people is required for their real happiness. The demand to give up illusions about the existing state of affairs is the demand to give up a state of affairs that needs illusions. The criticism of religion is therefore in embryo the criticism of the value of tears, the halo of which is religion.”<sup>23</sup>*

Freud believes that people would be much better if they abolish superstitious elements of faith; still he believes that many will still stick to these faiths. Marx moves one step farther announcing that people cannot abolish the tyranny of exploitation until they withdraw the religious beliefs, creating hallucinations. Marx is confident about the growth of socialism and gradual abolition of religion:

*“...violent measures against religion are nonsense; but this is an opinion: as socialism grows, religion will disappear.”<sup>24</sup>*

Marx believed that religion can only be attacked in a hostile or a frivolous way, there is no third way. The real, radical cure for the censorship would be its abolition.<sup>25</sup>

The observation of Marx that religion legitimizes power and puts the power in a privileged position. There are numerous documents in support of the observation of Marx, i.e. the caste system of India was sanctioned in Vedas, the basic scripts of Hindu religion. In the middle ages, the kings ruled with religious sanction of the church. Slave-owners in America promoted the conversion of the slaves to Christianity so that they can be dominated and oppressed in a better fashion. Therefore, Marx declares religion to be totally artificial and arbitrary creation of man based on material and socio-economic interests of a given society.

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2. *"This fact expresses merely that the object which labour produces – labour's product – confronts it as something alien, as a power independent of the producer. The product of labour is labour which has been embodied in an object, which has become material: it is the objectification of labour. Labour's realization is its objectification."* Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts, Karl Marx, Aakar Books Classics, Page -68.
3. *"The raising of wages excites in the worker the capitalist's mania to get rich, which he, however, can only satisfy by the sacrifice of his mind and body. The raising of wages presupposes and entails the accumulation of capital, and thus sets the product of labour against the worker as something ever more alien to him. Similarly, the division of labour renders him ever more one-sided and dependent, bringing with it the competition not only of men but also of machines. Since the worker has sunk to the level of a machine, he can be confronted by the machine as a competitor. Finally, as the amassing of capital increases the amount of industry and therefore the number of workers, it causes the same amount of industry to manufacture a larger amount of products, which leads to over-production and thus either ends by throwing a large section of workers out of work or by reducing their wages to the most miserable minimum."* Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts, Karl Marx, Aakar Books Classics, Page -25.
4. *"Religion is only the illusory Sun which revolves around man as long as he does not revolve around himself."*----- 'Marx's Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right' (1843), Oxford University Press, 1970 Translated: Joseph O'Malley
5. *"The beginning of religion, more precisely its content, is the concept of religion itself, that God is the absolute truth, the truth of all things, and subjectively that religion alone is the absolutely true knowledge."*
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8. 'A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right, Introduction', Karl Marx, Page- 75
9. *"The more man alienates himself from Nature, the more subjective, i.e., supra-natural or antinatural, is his view of things, the greater the horror he has of Nature, or at least of those natural objects and processes which displease his imagination, which affect him disagreeably."*-----The Essence of Christianity Ludwig Feuerbach 1841.
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Source: [Lenin Collected Works](#), Progress Publishers, 1965, Moscow, [Volume 10](#), pages 83-87. Translated: Transcription\Markup: [B. Baggins](#) .
16. State, Family, Education, Anti-Dühring ,Part III: Socialism' by Frederick Engels 1877
17. "कर्मण्येवाधिकारस्ते मा फलेषु कदाचन।मा कर्मफलहेतुर्भूर्मा ते सङ्गोऽस्त्वकर्मणि।" 2.47, Srimadbhagabatgita.
18. English translation of lines: "You have a right to perform your prescribed action, but you are not entitled to the fruits of your action. Never consider yourself the cause of the results your activities, and never be associated to not doing your duty." 2.47, Srimadbhagabatgita.
19. "Just as Darwin discovered the law of development or organic nature, so Marx discovered the law of development of human history: the simple fact, hitherto concealed by an overgrowth of ideology, that mankind must first of all eat, drink, have shelter and clothing, before it can pursue politics, science, art, religion, etc.; that therefore the production of the immediate material means, and consequently the degree of economic development attained by a given people or during a given epoch, form the foundation upon which the state institutions, the legal conceptions, art, and even the ideas on religion, of the people concerned have been evolved, and in the light of which they must, therefore, be explained, instead of vice versa, as had hitherto been the case."----- Engels, [Speech at the Graveside of Karl Marx](#) (1883).
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22. *“By religion, then, I understand a propitiation or conciliation of powers superior to man which are believed to direct and control the course of nature and of human life. Thus defined, religion consists of two elements, a theoretical and a practical, namely, a belief in powers higher than man and an attempt to propitiate or please them. Of the two, belief clearly comes first, since we must believe in the existence of a divine being before we can attempt to please him. But unless the belief leads to a corresponding practice, it is not a religion but merely a theology; in the language of St. James, “faith, if it hath not works, is dead, being alone.” In other words, no man is religious who does not govern his conduct in some measure by the fear or love of God. On the other hand, mere practice, divested of all religious belief, is also not religion. Two men may behave in exactly the same way, and yet one of them may be religious and the other not. If the one acts from the love or fear of God, he is religious; if the other acts from the love or fear of man, he is moral or immoral according as his behaviour comports or conflicts with the general good.” — [James George Frazer, The Golden Bough.](#)*
23. *“However, psychoanalytic investigation of the individual teaches with especial emphasis that god is in every case modelled after the father and that our personal relation to god is dependent upon our relation to our physical, fluctuating and changing with him, and that god at bottom is nothing but an exalted father. Here also, as in the case of totemism, psychoanalysis advises us to believe the faithful, who call god father just as they called the totem their ancestor. If psychoanalysis deserves any consideration at all, then the share of the father in the idea of a god must be very important, quite aside from all the other origins and meanings of god upon which psychoanalysis can throw no light. But then the father would be represented twice in primitive sacrifice, first as god, and secondly as the totem-animal sacrifice, and we must ask, with all due regard for the limited number of solutions which psychoanalysis offers, whether this is possible and what the meaning of it may be..” – ‘Totem and Taboo: Resemblances between the Psychic Lives of Savages and Neurotics’ by Sigmund Freud, Translator: A. A. Brill, London George Routledge & Sons, Limited 1919.*
24. *“Religion is an illusion and it derives its strength from the fact that it falls in with our instinctual desires.” - ‘New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis’, Sigmund Freud.*
25. *“Religious doctrines ... are all illusions, they do not admit of proof, and no one can be compelled to consider them as true or to believe in them.” – ‘The Future of an Illusion’ by — [Sigmund Freud.](#)*
26. *“For a long time it has been known that the first systems of representations with which men have pictured to themselves the world and themselves were of religious origin. There is no religion that is not a cosmology at the same time that it is a speculation upon divine things. If philosophy and the sciences were born of religion, it is because religion began by taking the place of the sciences and philosophy.” –The Elementary Forms of*

- the Religious Life (1912), by Émile Durkheim trans. J. W. Swain (2nd edition 1976).
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