A CRITICAL EVALUATION OF MARX’S THEORY OF RELIGION

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Abstract:
Beginning with a discussion of the ideological and sociological backgrounds to Marx’s views on religion, the work examines and interprets the major bones of contention in his theory of religion. The paper highlights the positive contributions of Marx’s theory while criticizing the obvious inconsistencies and overgeneralizations in his views. Specifically, it is conclusively argued that while we may discern the dehumanizing and debilitating trends in religion along with Marx, we should not fail to recognize and duly acknowledge the creative de-alienating, transformative and liberating trends in religion.

Key Words: Karl Marx; theory; ideological; sociological; alienation; humanism; Religion
INTRODUCTION

Karl Marx’s theory of religion is a complex network of intellectual developments drawn from a variety of sources: philosophical, moral, social, historical, economical, political and anthropological. As Haralambos and Heald (1980) point out, Marx’s ideas and writings “contain inconsistencies, ambiguities and changes in emphasis” (534) so much that it is difficult to exhaust the possibilities of their interpretations. It is in keeping with this observation that Lewis (1975) declares that:

No great thinker’s ideas have been turned upside-down, so misunderstood and misrepresented as those of Karl Marx. The term ‘Marxism’ has come to mean in some quarters such a farrago of nonsense that one is inclined to say with Marx himself: “Well, one thing is quite certain, I am not a Marxist.” (37)

In view of the vastness, variations and variegatedness of approaches to Marx’s theory of religion, it is worth mentioning here that any attempt to interpret Marx may not be totally free from elements of bias, sentiment or subjectivism. In this perspective, therefore, this paper represents something very close to a particular interpretation of Marx’s concept of religion. For a deeper and broader understanding, the paper will be concerned with three basic goals: (i) surveying the ideological and sociological backgrounds that influenced Karl Marx’s view of Religion; (ii) examining the basic assumptions of Marx’s religious concept; and (iii) critically evaluating the Marxian interpretation of religion.
1. **Ideological and Sociological Backgrounds to Karl Marx’s Theory of Religion**

Karl Marx is primarily concerned with the alienation (deprivation) of man in society, especially in a capitalist society where there is private ownership of property and private control of production and distribution of goods and services. His analysis then looks at religion mainly as a product of alienation. There are a lot of influences on Marx, which form the backgrounds to his interpretation of religion and of all aspects of social life. These influences can be considered as both ideological and sociological. Before examining his theory of religion, it will be pertinent for us to consider them briefly.

a. **Ideological Backgrounds to Karl Marx’s Theory of Religion**

Ideologically, Marx’s thinking is deeply influenced, among other things, by the works and thought of two great and famous German philosophers, George Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel and Ludwig Andreas Feuerbach. The idea of dialectical change, which is found at the epicenter of the Marxian theory of history and society, was developed by Hegel. Hegel applies his theory of dialectic to the history of human society and in particular to the realm of ideas. He sees historical change as a dialectical movement of men’s ideas and thoughts. He believes that society is essentially an expression of these human thoughts or ideas. In his dialectical view of society, conflict between incompatible ideas produces new concepts, which provide the basis for social change (Haralambos and Heald, 1980: 535). Hegel therefore explains the alienation in society as a product or consequence of religious ideas since, for him, ideas create society. In other words, religion is for Hegel the cause, creator or producer of alienation in human society.
Marx’s views of history and class struggle, which greatly account for his interpretation of religion, are based on this Hegelian concept of dialectics. Influenced by this, he sees any process of change as involving tension between incompatible forces, struggle of opposites or a conflict of contradictions. However, Marx, because of his pre-occupation with economic factors as the basis of reality, rejects the priority Hegel gives to thoughts and ideas as the major determinants of society. He argues that the sources of change lie not in ideological contradictions, but in contradictions in the economic system in particular and society in general. In rejection of Hegel’s claim that thoughts and ideas are the creators of society, Marx rather maintains that man’s ideas are primarily “a reflection of the social relationships of economic production” (Haralambos and Heald 1980: 535) and so do not provide the main sources of change. While Marx does not altogether neglect the Hegelian idea of the dialectical relationship between the mind (ideas or thoughts), and society, his emphasis is characteristically and almost exclusively on the role of institutions (especially economic institutions) in forming man’s self-awareness or self-consciousness. The significant insight of Marx, therefore, is that society produces human consciousness or man’s “conscious existence” or “actual life process” (Marx and Engels, 1940: 14-15, 19). It is in the light of Marx’s pre-occupation with (or exclusive emphasis on) economic factors in the formation and determination of society, human consciousness and relationships that he gives Hegel’s concept of dialectical relationship a sociological context and interpretation.

He maintains that it is the economic factors that exert the primary influence on and largely shape the other aspects of society. Applying Hegel’s theory to his own theory of religion, Mark uses Hegel upside down in an antithetic way. While Hegel sees religion as the cause and creator or
producer of alienation in society, Marx maintains that religion is the consequence or product of alienation in society.

Another major influence on Marx’s ideological development is the atheistic writings of Ludwig A. Feuerbach. Responding to the religious atheism of Feuerbach, Marx, in conjunction with his Hegelian heritage and his own materialistic conception of human life, develops his complete idea of religion as a product of and response to man’s self-alienation. In his book, *The Essence of Christianity*, Feuerbach had presented a theory according to which religion was the projection of man’s highest aspirations unto the cosmos and the cause and promoter of man’s alienation from his own depth and power by emptying his superlative qualities into the divine. According to him, God is nothing more than the human essence and aspirations projected to the outward. Thus, religion, he affirms, is “the separation of man from himself” (Feuerbach, 1957: 41). He maintains that by projecting his essence into the supernatural sphere, man impoverishes himself. For man to realize his full humanity, according to him, God must therefore become man and theology be converted to anthropology. Man’s immaturity is for Feuerbach the reason for this religious self-alienation of man. For him, therefore, education or enlightenment is the effective instrument of de-alienation of man, that is, of ‘humanizing divinity’ and ‘anthropologizing theology’.

Karl Marx’s theory of religion shows an obvious and unmistakable influence of Feuerbach’s atheistic thought. Marx agrees with the psychology of Feuerbach’s atheistic opinion, but criticizes its lack of sociological understanding. He complains that Feuerbach did not give adequate attention to the social reasons why people invariably project the best within them unto the cosmos. Setting
out to discover what these social factors are that drive people to make such projections, Marx differs from Feuerbach, as from Hegel, by insisting that religious alienation is the product and reflection of social alienation rather than its producer. It is on the basis of this conviction that Marx develops his theory of alienation. In trying to discover the social conditions that shaped Marx’s perspective of alienation we come to the second level of influence on Marx’s theory of religion – the sociological backgrounds – to which we now turn.

b. **Sociological Backgrounds to Karl Marx’s Theory of Religion**

Sociologically Marx’s theory of religion is shaped by the social conditions of his time and society. His notion about religion is formed from his notion of alienation which itself is formulated from his actual observations of the dehumanizing effects of the economic system of his day and society – the dehumanizing effect of the factory system of the class-ridden European society of his day. It was a society where the workers were being reduced to mere mechanical instruments of work and production while at the same time the products of their labour were estranged from them and transferred to the bourgeois owners of the means of production and distribution. Lenin describes the Prussian society of Marx’s day as a “society … wholly based on the exploitation of the vast masses of the working class by a tiny minority of the population…It is a slave society”, since the “free” workers, who all their life work for the capitalists, are “entitled only to such means of subsistence as are essential for the maintenance of slaves who produce profit, for the safeguarding and perpetuation of capitalist slavery” (Lenin 1965:7).

Marx sees this profit-oriented industrial mode of production as the source of a kind of alienation that affected both the workers and the general society. While the workers were both
alienated from and deprived of their true worth and rightful gain, this deprivation absurdly constituted the wealth of the owning class. (Marx 1964: 75).

According to Marx, the painful experience of alienation is capable of enabling the workers to discover the extent of their enslavement and exploitation and possibly even to organize political forces to transform the conditions of life. Here is the most significant turning point in Marx’s theory of alienation from which he comes to analyze the role of religion in alienation-infested society. It is Marx’s conception of the role religion plays in this condition of intense alienation that forms the immediate background to his popular views on religion.

We shall now examine the basic assumptions or bones of contention in Marx’s religious concept in the next section of this paper.

2. Karl Marx’s Concept of Religion

Karl Marx’s views of religion can be summarily examined in three perspectives as: (i) a reflection and projection of social alienation; (ii) an ideological tool to legitimize and perpetuate the oppressive social order; and (iii) as the opium of the people (or masses).

Reflecting on the situation of alienation produced by the economic system of his day, the consequent social conflict produced by the conflicting economic interest of the groups and classes; and the inevitability of a ‘proletarian’ protest against the marginalizing conditions of alienation, Marx forms his theory of the origin, essence and role of religion. The essence of Marx’s assessment of the true worth of religion can be gleaned or extracted from the following statement of his:
The basis of irreligious criticism is; Man makes religion, religion does not make man. In other words, religion is the self-consciousness and self-esteem of man who has either not yet found himself or has already lost himself again … Man is the world of man, the state of the society. This state, this society produces religion, an inverted world-consciousness because they are an inverted world. Religion is the general theory of that world … its enthusiasm, its moral sanction, its solemn complement, its universal source of consolation and justification. It is the fantastic realization of the human essence because the human essence has no true reality. The struggle against religion is therefore indirectly a fight against the world of which religion is the spiritual aroma …” (Marx and Engels 1975: 38).

In these propositions, Marx sees religion, in the first place, as a reflection of people’s actual conditions and realities or the product of alienation in society, It is the frustrations produced by the socio-economic order that prompt people to create illusions. According to him, religion arises to meet the need for ideals that would sacralize and protect the falsified perception or false consciousness and self-alienation created by the discrepancies in the social order. In other words, religion, according to him, arises from and is maintained by the need on the part of the oppressed and exploited majority of men to escape from the oppressive and harsh conditions of social life and from the consequent alienation and dehumanization in order to assert their true human worth. But since Marx says that the human essence has no true reality in the alienated society, he maintains that religion is “the fantastic realization of the human essence.” That is to say that man falsely
thinks that his religious self-definition or identity is the true one. In his view, however, man in religion, rather alienates himself from himself by inventing God. He invests in religion or into God at his own lost and expense. The main concern of Marx here is that this religious alienation is essentially a reflection and projection of a more fundamental alienation in the social relationships of the capitalist society. Expressed in the words of his friend, Engels, “All religion … 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.”(Marx and Engels, 1975: 128). In reflecting the harsh social conditions, religion, as Marx further explains, both expresses the dehumanizing plight of the proletarians as well as legitimizes these conditions. In his own words, religion “tells the story of man’s injustices to man, but tells it in such a way that it legitimates the present order …” (qtd in Baum, 1975: 32). Religion is the reflection of man’s misery on earth, but at the same time it persuades people to accept this miserable present social order by raising their hope of happiness from this world to heaven. As a reflection or social realities, religion in Marx’s understanding, is also a mode of resignation from the protest against the sufferings and miseries of the capitalist exploitation. “Religion”, he says, “is the sigh of the oppressed creature …” and “Religious distress is at the same time the expression of real distress and also the protest against real distress” (Marx and Engels, 1975: 39). That means that the fact that people turn to religion is an expression of their being uncomfortable with the distressing condition of social life and of their desire to find a solution to the miseries of life. For Marx, however, religion responds to this by offering a sacred dimension of alienation.
In the proletarians’ tendency to protest against the distressing forces in society, Marx sees the oppressors’ vested interest in propagating the religious ideology. It is from here that he forms his second view of religion as an ideological tool to legitimize and perpetuate the oppressive status quo. In their effort to explain the link between the development of the social relations – the class structure of society – and religion, Marx and Engels jointly maintain that the exploiting classes foster religion in their own vested interest “as a means of blinding and curbing the popular masses” (Marx and Engels, 1975: 39). In this connection, Marx sees religion as “the supreme legitimation of the structures of domination in human society” (qtd in Baum, 1975: 32-33). It is the ideological tool of the dominant groups for sanctioning and moralizing the social evils and exploitation inflicted or exerted on the oppressed classes. Marx insists that it was to achieve the aim of the oppressors in keeping the oppressed perpetually under subjection, and in persuading them to accept their condition calmly as profitable, that religion was invented by the bourgeoisie class. Religion, according to Marx, is therefore “a body of myths which … provides many of the deceptions which form the basis of ruling class ideology …” It offers the justification and legitimation for the subordination of the subject class and the domination and privilege of the ruling class” (Haralambos and Heald, 1980: 460). Marx refers to the popular stanza of the Victorian hymn titled “All Things Bright and Beautiful” to illustrate how religion often justifies the social order and the persons’ respective positions within it:

The rich man in his castle,

The poor man at his gate,

God made them high and lowly,
And ordered their estate. (Haralambos and Heald, 1980: 461).

He infers from this that religion in such a way encourages people to accept their social situations theologically as the perfect work of God’s infinite wisdom and foreknowledge, who has created and ordained the social structure. Marx sees such worldview as the ruling class ideology to maintain and secure the oppressive system and their selfish interests and tendencies.

Besides being the ideological tool used by the oppressive class for the legitimization of oppression, Marx finally recognizes and acknowledges that there is something operative, functional and positive in the religion of the oppressed class. Hence, although he jettisons it as an illusion and a fantasy, yet Marx acknowledges the positive role of religion in consoling the oppressed in their predicaments. In his own words: “Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, just as it is the spirit of spiritless condition. It is the opium of the people” (Marx and Engels, 1975: 39). In this famous statement, Marx sums up his own idea of religion. It has been said that this statement forms “the cornerstone of the whole Marxist outlook on religion” (Marx and Engels, 1975: 10). Marx means to say that religion acts as an opiate to dull the pain produced by oppression and make the oppressed docile and anaesthetized. It plays a useful but illusive psycho-therapeutic role by bringing consolations that make its adherents to forget their frustrations. It does not really solve the problem of human suffering, but is simply a misguided attempt to make life more bearable. As such Marx sees religion as merely stupefying its adherents “rather than bringing them true happiness and fulfillment” (Haralambos and Heald, 1980: 460). It is, in Lenin’s language, “a kind of spiritual booze in which the slaves of capital drown their human image and their claims to any decent life” (Lenin, 1965: 7-8). Religion,
Marx explains, can dull or relieve the pains of oppression by making a virtue of the sufferings produced by oppression and a piety of poverty; by promising a paradise of eternal bliss in the future, and by offering hope of supernatural intervention to solve the problems on earth. In such ways religion makes human suffering tolerable and even desirable. Marx extracts this view from such biblical passages like “For the love of money is the root of all evil, which while some coveted after, they have erred from the faith, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows” (I Timothy 6:10); “For it is easier for a camel to go through a needle’s eye, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God” (Luke 18:25); and “My kingdom is not of this world....” (John 18:36).

On the basis of these analyses, Marx asserts that religion is more common among the exploited than among the exploiters. He maintains that most religious movements originate in oppressed classes because their social conditions provide the most fertile ground for the growth of new religions. In Marx’s analysis, religion is not, however, the exclusive phenomenon of oppressed groups. The ruling classes also adopt religious beliefs, but to justify their position both to themselves and to others. Religion is often directed and supported by the ruling classes to further their interest. In the words of Marx and Engels, the clergymen and the landlords have ever gone hand in hand: “In feudal England the lord of the manor’s power was often legitimated by pronouncements from the pulpit. In return for this support, landlords would often richly endow the established church” (Haralambos and Heald, 1980: 461).

Apart from pampering and euphemizing the effects of oppression, Marx identifies related role of religion as the very instrument of that oppression. Thus, while Marx accepts that religion
makes hardships of life bearable, he insists at the same time that it tends in this way to discourage people from making efforts to change their social situations and conditions. It prevents the idea of overthrowing the existing social structure by means of a revolution and acts as a mechanism of social control. In this way religion reinforces class relationships and inhibits class-consciousness. Marx recognizes in religion the capacity for expressing, stimulating and stirring discontents and criticisms among the oppressed. Nevertheless he asserts that all religions are such a false representation of reality and under-estimation of creative human powers that they can never be vehicles of social revolutions. Since religion serves to prevent the proletarian protest, Marx believes that a less religious society is more likely to experience significant structural change than a deeply religious one. Based on this conviction, Marx and his associates assert that the elimination of religion in society is necessary and inevitable for a meaningful social change and the emancipation of the oppressed and exploited proletarians. A “socialitarian system, rightly conceived”, says Engels, “has therefore … to abolish all paraphernalia of religious magic, and therewith all the essential elements of religious worship” (Marx and Engels, 1975: 128). Affirming the incompatibility of religion with the struggle for liberation, Lenin (1965) later outlines the cause and course, reason and route, and the why and how of overcoming and eliminating ‘religious prejudice’ in order to achieve the goal of the proletarian party. According to him the task of this association:

... requires an implacable and consistent ideological struggle against religion. Such an association cannot and must not be indifferent to lack of
class-consciousness, ignorance or obscurantism in the shape of religious beliefs … We founded our association … precisely for such a struggle against every religious bamboozling of the workers (15).

Marx notes, however, that religion, though an illusion is a necessary part of all class-divided societies. As a result we cannot hope to dispel or dispense with that illusion so long as the social conditions, which make it necessary, continue. But as soon as those conditions are eliminated, religion would die the natural death of insignificance or irrelevance. He believes that in the free or communist society; religion will not be needed because the conditions that create religion would disappear.

With the foregoing presentation, it will be expedient at this point to proceed to evaluate critically the credibility and validity of the Marxian assertions about religion considered so far.

3. **Critical Evaluation of Marx’s Interpretation of Religion**

Although Marx attacks religion vehemently, it would yet be very illusive to regard his theory of religion as a mere attack. There is considerable evidence to support some aspects of the Marxian view of the role of religion in society. In our evaluation of Marx’s theory therefore, we will consider the positive contributions of his theory as well as the possible criticisms of his theory.

a. **The Positive Contributions of Marx’s Theory of Religion.**

There are very many positive aspects of Marx’s theory of religion, which we can summarize under five headings, namely, his Methodological Contributions; Socio-historical Observations; Psycho-therapeutic Affirmations; Humanistic Motivations; and Purging and purifying Operations.
(i) **Marx’s Methodological Contributions.**

Much of what Marx says in his theory of religion has contributed so much to the polymethodic study of religion. Marx’s theory has made significant contributions to the understanding of the religious life and of human life in general. It touches on important socio-historical facts, which help to show what significant roles social conditions can play in the expression of religion. The fact that religious experiences cannot be expressed in a vacuum but in a specific socio-cultural context for instance, is being given due prominence in contemporary study of religion and this is the core of Marx’s contention. Milton J. Yinger, the great sociologist of religion, has observed in line with this that religion is affected by its social context in several ways, and shaped by the socio-cultural setting in which it is founded.

“Religious systems are powerfully affected by the surrounding social structures which means that Ceylonese Buddhism is not Japanese Buddhism, Spanish Catholicism is not American Catholicism … we cannot understand religion scientifically without relating it to society and culture …” (Yinger, 1970: 203).

Today, it will be difficult to carry out any scientific study of the religious phenomenon without taking into due consideration the roles played by social factors.

(ii) **Marx’s Socio-Historical Observations.**

Marx observes that religion always emerges as a response to exploitations, oppressions and other forms of hard conditions of life. This view gives us a reliable sociological key and framework for explaining the upsurge of new religious phenomena like the millenarian movements, which are found primarily in deprived groups. It also gives a theoretical framework for handling the common
question why religious adherence is more common among the poor and oppressed than among the rich.

Furthermore, Marx’s observation that religion has often buttressed and legitimated power and privilege and has itself been aided and abetted by the oppressors as against the oppressed cannot be denied at all. Many instances of this fact abound from history and societies. The caste system of traditional India is justified by Hindu religious beliefs. In Medieval Europe, Kings ruled by divine right. Slave owners in the southern states of America often supported the conversion of slaves to Christianity, believing it to be “a controlling and gentling influence” (Haralambos and Heald, 1980: 462)

(iii) Marx’s Psycho-Therapeutic Affirmations:

Marx’s view of religion as “the opium of the people” and the statements preceding it cannot be given only a negative reading. Here Marx, whatever his original intension might be, nevertheless reveals a major positive and humanitarian aspect of the role of religion in human life, which even vindicates and authenticates the practice of religion. He here affirms that religion plays an important psycho-therapeutic role. It gives such an assurance, calmness and serenity of mind, which enables man not to capitulate in the face of the distressing circumstances, predicaments and vicissitudes of social life. We can, therefore, derive, even from Marx’s own expression that religion is needed in so far as it offers people consolation in an unjust and oppressive world and makes life more bearable for the oppressed. This “imaginary medicine”, “tranquilizer” or “opium”, even if it may not actually cure the ‘sickness’ inflicted on people by the social conditions, as Marx maintains, can, at least, alleviate it. Therefore, Marx positively gives us a reason why we should persistently practise
religion; for since, practically speaking, no more efficacious “pill” has yet been, and may never be discovered, and the inhuman social conditions have not yet been completely eradicated, religion remains indispensable to human life.

(iv) **Marx’s Humanistic Motivations**

It is important to recognize that Marx bases his critique of religion on a humanistic understanding of man’s social existence and on the conviction that human fulfillment and happiness are in fact the destiny of humanity. Marx’s personal faith in the destiny of man is the source of his social passion and attack on religion. His analysis of man’s self-alienation is inspired by his humanistic vision of the future. It is based on his prophetic conviction that humanity is destined to be free. In his humanistic dedication, Marx sees alienation as essentially the product of disabling factors, and he seeks to help man to free himself from these oppressive forces (Baum, 1975: 38). From this very perspective, we may say that Marx seeks “to free humanity from the oppressive weight of religion and sought to restore to humanity … its lost divinity” (Perez-Esclarin, 1974:153). He feels that the full realization and exaltation of humanity calls for the total rejection of God and religion.

This humanistic concern permeates Marx’s whole thought. His concern pivots around a more general and basic goal – emancipation from every alienation. He rejects God and religion only in order to liberate people. We can affirm that Marx primarily seeks to sustain and promote the dignity and worth of human life. His theory is an effort to supply human life with meaning, purpose and direction. It is a passionate call for man to save himself from the oppressive forces of life. In this direction, both the Marxist and the believer stand on some common ground in that both wish to
preserve and bring to fulfillment, the dignity and essence of the human person in the face of serious threats to it. The issue that divides them has to do with the basis of this common commitment. Therefore, in fighting the cause of the poor and the oppressed, Marx so displays intense and genuine humanism that it has been said that he would have been much more Christian than most Christians, had he mixed it with a little religion. Hence as Perez – Esclarin (1974) points out, “he is the Good Samaritan of history, who stopped to heal the wounds of the wounded human society by-passed by the priests, the economic planners, and the politicians” (153). He is “a new Moses … leading an enslaved humanity into the new Canaan” (154).

(v) Marx’s Purging and Purifying Operations

Objectively speaking, we can maintain from the foregoing discussion that, although Marx’s view of religion appears to be a frontal attack on religion in general and Christianity in particular, it indirectly purifies our understanding of faith and brings it closer to authentically biblical religion. According to C. H. Pinnock (1980), what Marx rises up to protest against is actually not the God of biblical Christianity, but an idol created by corrupted, distorted and adulterated Christianity. Marx rightly highlights on many degenerate aspects of Christendom and the Church at a historical point, pointing out basic flaws and failures for which we should even be grateful to him. His theory is a seasoned critique of the excessive individualism of Protestantism, which is unequivocally the chief root of the capitalist spirit. It is corrective of the equivocatory manipulation and application of scriptures to maintain the capitalist mentality (27).
In effect, therefore, we can read Marx’s position as a worthy challenge to the Church to get back to its own roots in the prophets and the apostles and to return from its backslidden role as legitimator and perpetuator of the unjust status quo. Marx did not really register any mortal or annihilating criticism of the original Christian faith as the Bible presents it, but only denounced the “Christianity gone to seed, forgetful of its proper mission” (Pinnock, 1980: 111). His attack performs the valuable service in the interest of faith itself, in exposing styles of belief, which are really oppressive, dehumanizing and debilitating. Thus Marx’s attack, as Pinnock observes, “serves positively as a critical scalpel, cutting away the diseased matter which often clings to the body of true religion”. It functions “like chisels chipping away the barnacles that have gotten attached to the ship of faith” (113). Marx indirectly gives us a reason not to abandon faith, but to adopt it for the right and beneficial reasons and causes. We can therefore accept and appreciate his criticism as having the positive potential to help refine and perfect our understanding of the truth of religion and to sharpen our understanding of pure and true religion. It acts as a clarion call to accept and practice religion in its pure unadulterated state, and a warning against its manipulation and corruption by following human traditions and ideologies.

Marx has, therefore, been described as serving the Church as a secular prophet “to call us back to socially relevant religion contained in our scriptures (112). More than being a “figure of world historical significance”, as Erich Fromm describes him, (Morris, 1986:8). Marx is, therefore, also a figure of world religious significance.

b. **The Possible Criticisms of Marx’s Theory of Religion**
As an indictment on the degenerate aspects of religion at a specific historical point or of those forms of religion which are world-denying, alienating, oppressive and dehumanizing, Marx’s analysis and criticism could be justifiably accepted as seasoned and constructive. However, as a general theory of religion which Marx actually intends it to be, it is grossly inadequate, misguided and self-destroying. Despite its positive contributions, we can agree with J. A. Thrower (1965: 34) that “Marx’s eulogy … is the eulogy of the obituary. Ultimately, like Brutus, Marx comes to bury not to praise”. Here we will consider some basic flaws in Marx’s interpretation of religion under the following headings: (i) philosophical conclusions of Marx’s theory; (ii) dimensional exclusions of Marx’s theory; (iii) theological refutations of Marx’s theory; and (iv) empirical demonstrations against Marx’s theory.

(i) **Philosophical Conclusions of Marx’s Theory:**

It is worth noting that Marx moves from mere identification and analysis of how religion functioned in a particular society at a point in time to a costly generalized theory of the origin, essence and validity of religion. He interprets the whole essence of religion as an arbitrary and artificial creation of man and social conditions and so illusory. What he offers by way of explaining the phenomenon of religion would be totally irrelevant to the truth and validity of the religious man’s affirmations. That social conditions can lead to belief in religion does not give the reason for that belief itself. Marx failed to recognize the marked distinction between causes and reasons – the cause of a particular belief’s being held and the reason for holding it. He judges the validity of the religious phenomenon on the basis of causes while it is only the believers’ reasons for believing that can properly say something about the validity of the belief. To offer an explanation of the holding
of a particular belief in terms of sociological causes is not to explain why a particular individual or
class of individuals holds that belief. It is also to say nothing about the validity or essence of the
belief itself. For example, there may be good psychological and social cause for a student’s
believing in certain geographical or historical propositions such as “Nigeria is a country in Africa”
and “Nigeria became independent in 1960”. Such causes for one’s believing in these assertions may
be, as Thrower (1965) points out:

(1) The authoritative voice of one’s teacher;
(2) The fear of punishment or social humiliation in the class consequent upon not believing
them;
(3) The fact that everyone believes them; etc (34).
To enumerate these causes is to say nothing about the validity or essence of the beliefs themselves.
By identifying the explanation of the causes for believing a thing with the explanation of the
validity or essence of that belief, Karl Marx falls into what Gordon Allport identifies as the “genetic
fallacy” (Bank, 1973:415).

Connected with this is the reflection that Marx’s attack on religion is based on the apriori
assumption or presupposition of God’s non-existence. In advocating the necessary eradication of
faith in God and religion for the success of human liberation, Marx falls into the fallacy of begging
the question because he assumed the unproven hypothesis of God’s non-existence as an axiomatic
or given. Here then, Marx’s atheism is not to be regarded as a logical or philosophical conclusion,
but as what Perez-Esclarin (1974) calls “the speculative justification of a politico-practical
decision” (153) which lacks logical persuasiveness.
(iii) **Dimensional Exclusions of Marx’s Theory**

Marx’s understanding of the nature of man’s consciousness and consequently or religious consciousness as a mere reflection of politico-economic realities is very exclusivist in its scope or dimension of understanding human life. In contemporary thought, more critical, comprehensive and less dogmatic studies of human life, even among Marxists, reveal the unreliability of this exclusivist position. For instance, the school of social thought known as “Critical Theory”, which was formed by a distinguished group of neo- and post-Marxist thinkers in Frankfurt, Germany (among whom we have Max Horkheimer, Theodore Adorno, Erich Fromm, Hebert Marcus, Leo Lowenthal, Ernst Bloch, George Luckacs, etc.), has developed a perspective of understanding human life, behaviour and consciousness antagonistic to orthodox Marxism. These men, though Marxist in orientation, attempt to develop a more comprehensive method of human understanding by studying not only economic, but all human relationships. Consequently, they conclusively stress the creative character of all human knowledge and cultural activity, thereby strongly opposing the orthodox Marxian notion that knowledge and culture are reflections of economic relationships or of social environment. They point out also that the dialectical element or social conflict which Marx speaks of, is rooted in man’s inherent nature. That is to say that the impulse to revolutionary critique does not originate in the economic process, but is the inherent, ineradicable and inalienable mark of human existence (Moltmann et al. 1974:124-126).

It is conclusive, therefore, from this joint finding that any understanding of man and of religion which results solely from the application of Marx’s economic theory or dialectical
materialism is an impoverished one, which leads to a travesty of human nature and of the essence of
religion as we know them.

(iii) **Theological Refutations of Marx’s Theory**

A clear understanding of human nature, as contemporary theological thinkers make us to
realize, is the only thing that will help us to understand the intrinsic nature of religion deeper than
the phenomenological data obtained from casual observations. The contemporary works of
professionals such as Schleiermacher, Rudolf Otto, and Paul Tillich reveal that Marx’s
characterization of religion ignores much of what has gone into the making of the religious
consciousness, particularly, man’s sense of the ‘numinous’ – of a transcendent reality which comes
upon him, challenges, seizes and controls him instead of an abstract projection of his own creation.
From their expert knowledge of the religious experiences of man, these scholars jointly show that
part of the motivation behind man’s religious quest is his abiding sense of contingency and
insufficiency. This sense of contingency they argue comes from reverence to a higher reality which
lies at the background of religion (Thrower, 1965, 1966: 46-47). Therefore, from these explanations
we can go further to conclude that religion is a dynamic agency or effect not caused by an arbitrary
act of will or a reflection or socio-political and economic structures, but by the realization of man’s
inherent and indispensable sense of contingency and of the ‘numinous’.

(iv) **Empirical Demonstrations against Marx’s Theory**

There are a number of socio-empirical facts which can be referred to in demonstration
against Marx’s views of religion. The first of these empirical demonstrations is against Marx’s
utopian view of the communistic society in which all exploitations and oppressions will end while
religion consequently and inevitable dies a natural death. From our consideration of man’s abiding sense of contingency lying at the grassroots of religion, we can be doubtful or suspicious of Marx’s claim that society, properly structured, can fulfill and satisfy that which the traditional religions of the world have fulfilled. The questions we must join J. A. Thrower (1966) to raise are: ‘Can society overcome man’s sense of contingency? Or, can education and science wholly rid us of a sense of reverence? Or, is human nature such that its deepest needs and aspirations can be satisfied solely in a sociological context?’ (48). Marx fails to understand that the individual’s needs of fulfillment has such compelling strength that purely social or interpersonal relations cannot satisfy. The resilience, resurgence and revival of religious movements and surrogate religions even in “communist” nations prove this claim unrealistic. From his detailed study of former Soviet Society, David Lane states that “although religion probably has little hold over the population there is evidence that religion has shown a certain resilience to communism”. Although organized Christianity has certainly declined in Russia due to the policy of the ruling elite, Lane points to an estimate which places the number of baptized Orthodox Christians in the period 1947-57 at ninety million which, according to him, was roughly the same in 1914. He further maintains that religion in Russia is not a mere “hangover from pre-communist days” but that “despite official disapproval a number of small religious movements still continue to spring up” (Haralambos and Heald, 1980:463). Thus we may agree with Jaques Martin in his *The Rights of Man and Natural Law* that “man has secrets which escape the group and a vocation which the group does not encompass” (qtd in Thrower 1965, 1966: 48).
Furthermore, Marx’s utopian optimism that a properly ordered society can have itself overcome the evils of society, betrays his gross lack of recognition of the endemic evil in human nature. Even in communist countries, the same forms of social injustices, protests against social evils like students’ demonstration, etc., so much abound that it can be said unequivocally that the humanism of Marx has been variously betrayed by Marxism. This point is illustrated in such a work as The God that Failed where a group of writers tell of their gradual disillusionment with communist societies. They show that the promise and expectation of a better world resulting from political revolution still remains unrealized and that there is little or no hope of the classless and free society predicted by Marx even in those countries where communism has been tried for sometime (qtd in Thrower 1965, 1966: 48). We can then conclude with Thrower (1965, 1966) that a communist society is of necessity still “a society of the human all too human” and that since “society cannot satisfy man’s nature of its own”, Marxists should join hands with religious thinkers in the “common search … to find an adequate ontology in which man might be more truly placed” (49).

The last and most relevant empirical demonstration is against Marx’s most popular conviction that religion, as the inverted image or reflection of society and the opium of the people, is dehumanizing and an underestimation of human creative powers. Religion, for him, can never be a vehicle of social revolution, but serves to prevent the proletarian attempt to revolt. Therefore, any significant socio-structural change or revolution, Marx maintains, must of necessity eliminate religion. This Marxian view of religion stems from Marx’s misguided idea of a god opposed to liberation and human progress. But empirical facts demonstrate, against Marx’s position that the
God presented by biblical Christianity has always wished to foster human liberation and progress. One instance is the event of the Exodus. The social effects of the activities of the Old Testament prophets like Isaiah, Micah, Amos, and so on, and of the early Apostles pose an empirical question mark on the validity of Marx’s position. Rejecting Marx’s idea of God as the only possible one, we can variously demonstrate, in the light of abounding empirical studies, that religion is rather a stimulant of liberation rather than an opiate, and that God is a supreme liberator rather than being in opposition to liberation.

Although the religion Marx encountered in his day and society was almost totally identified with the socio-political and economic order and served as the sacred guarantor of the status quo, one would have expected Marx to undertake a comparative socio-historical study of religion in order to determine whether religion has always and everywhere displayed the same kind of legitimating and crippling function. Such a rewarding study later carried out by Max Weber, Emile Durkheim, Erich Fromm and Ernst Bloch reveal that Marx’s conclusions are only valid in certain social roles of religion, Max Weber rejects the Marxian view that religion is always shaped by the economic system. He strongly maintains that this is not always true. He discovers that there have been periods when religious trends have been a source of social criticism and by offering a new vision of human life, have actually affected the transformation of culture and society. Weber (1968) demonstrates that religion is never purely and simply the reflection and legitimation of society but also contains within its traditions critical and creative elements. He concludes that it is impossible, therefore, to come to quick generalizations about the social function of religion. Rather, in each case, a careful study is required (124-126).
On the same plane, Emile Durkheim (1965) from his sociological research insists that religion does not only legitimize, but does also revolutionize social order. While creating social stability and protecting society from undermining forces, religion also guarantees a critique of the existing social order and creates strong forces to change or reform it (470).

Erich Fromm’s study of the world religions reveal that Marx’s radical critique of religion, although it is born out of an essentially humanistic tendency to liberate humanity, does not exhaust the reality of religion. Erich Fromm, from his study distinguishes between authoritarian or alienating religion and humanistic or liberating religion. He concludes there from that the fact that there are, in addition to the “pathological” or “stick-making” trends of religion, other trends which are healing and humanizing cannot be invalidated by any negative critique. He argues that the human development programme to which Marx dedicated himself, namely, the elimination of human suffering caused by oppression, liberation of the true humanity from the false reality or consciousness imposed by the existing structure; justice; equality; etc., are the ‘ethic core’ of all the world religions. Fromm’s conclusion is that besides the elements which intensify man’s estrangement from his true human resources, there are yet religious trends which rather “communicate the ability to be more fully human” (qtd in Baum, 1975: 92).

Finally, Ernst Bloch, though an avowed atheistic Marxist, adopts a non-dogmatic investigation which shows that contrary to Marx’s view of the Christian eschatological concepts as “pie in the sky”, alienating and anti-revolutionary; these concepts rather give Christian preaching “a utopian or transformist thrust” (qtd in Baum, 1975: 274). In his brilliant book, *Thomas Muenzer: Theologian of Revolution* (1969), this great social philosopher examines from a non-dogmatic
Marxian position the relation of eschatology and politics, showing that the Christian teaching on eternal life, in whatever form, has political meaning and political effects in some cases. Ernst Bloch demonstrates that a political and economic analysis alone cannot account for the course of the revolutionary movements in Germany during the 16th century, unless accompanied by a study of radical religion, particularly the preaching of Thomas Muenzer. He maintains also that the spread of social unrest and the outbreak of the peasant revolt are unaccountable without taking this radical and yet genuine religiously inspired movement and preaching of Tomas Muenzer’s into due consideration (qtd in Baum, 1975: 277-278).

CONCLUSION

From our excursion into these empirical studies, we may here conclude by pointing out that religion is always, and inevitably a complex phenomenon that has various and varying trends and dimensions working together at the same time. While it may be possible for us to discern the dehumanizing and debilitating trends produced by socially-induced elements, we must not fail to recognize and duly acknowledge, at the same time, the creative, de-alienating and liberating trends in religion which “initiate men and women more deeply into their humanity and nourish the dream of a more humane social order” (Baum, 1975: 39).

Today, in many societies, Churches, Clergymen and religious councils have also been involved in this process of liberation. It is this religious commitment to the cause of liberation that gives rise to the popular movement called “Liberation Theology”. Marx would have, therefore, made his sociological contributions to the study of religion as an obstacle to human liberation. It seems therefore that Marx so over-reacts to his observations of the “pathological” or “pathogenic”
role of religion that he completely loses sight of its liberating and therapeutic role. Such failure to recognize these clear humanizing trends in the world religions in general and Christianity in particular, is a grossly blind obstinacy to accept clear empirical facts. Moreover, even if Marx could not see these trends in the religions of his own day, he should have been able to foresee, in accordance with his dialectical view of history that religion itself would still be able to change to the positive, if not for any other reasons, perhaps because of his own writings and criticisms. His inability to foresee this change leads him to produce what W. J. Hollenweger (1973) has called a “self-destroying prophecy”, that is, a prophecy which does not become true because people have changed their attitudes as a result of the very prophecy (136).
References


