

## **AN APPRAISAL OF MARX'S THEORY OF SOCIALISM AND RELIGION AS ALIENATION**

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### **Abstract**

This paper is an appraisal of Marx's theory of socialism and religion as alienation. Marx's discussion of these concepts was influenced by Hegel's dialectics and Feuerbach's materialism. Marx saw dialectics as the essence of matter. He believed that consciousness was attained by life and not the other way round. Marx is of the view that all major historical epoch has a particular mode of production associated to it, that is, its own particular economic laws. Thus, for any society that has ever appeared in history, the distribution of wealth and the sharing of society into classes is dependent upon what is produced, how it is produced and how the products are exchanged. Marx set out to fight the exploitation of the proletariat by the capitalist. This paper using evaluative approach examined Marx's theory of socialism and religion. In doing this it discovers that Marx was a freedom fighter. He went out to liberate the generality of humanity from the hands of the few exploiters. It also discovers that in doing this he ended up committing some fallacies. He ended up rejecting God and religion in his quest to liberate man. His view of man in the society and of religion are not totally in line with the general conception of human nature and the essence of religion. His idea of a god opposed to liberation and human progress was misguided.

**Key words:** Marx, Socialism, Religion, Dialectical Materialism, Proletariat, Capitalism, Historical Materialism.

## **Introduction**

Karl Marx can never be properly analysed without mentioning his friend Frederick Engels. This is because both of them were close colleagues in all that mattered. In the same line, discussing Marx without reference to great philosophers like G W F Hegel and Ludwig A Feuerbach whose influence shaped Marx's thought creates lacuna. Marx combined Hegel's dialectics with Feuerbach's materialism. The combination of these views formed his dialectical materialism. He saw dialectics as the essence of matter. He believed that consciousness was determined by life and not the other way round. His views made him a materialist. This is because he advocated that in the development of society, matter is primary. This implies that in our thought and knowledge we proceed from things to thought instead of thought to things.

Marx study of history which he called historical materialism made him contend that all major historical epoch has a particular mode of production associated to it, that is, its own particular economic laws. More so, production and exchange of things produced is yardstick of every social order. Consequently, for any society that has ever appeared in history, the distribution of wealth and the sharing of society into classes is dependent upon what is produced, how it is produced and how the products are exchanged. This simply imply that man's productive activity conditions his political life, his law, morality, religion, art and philosophy.

Given the above background, it is then clear why Marx saw religion as alienation. He conceived religion as the key to the entire social problems of man. His idea of a god opposed to liberation and human progress was misguided. He contended that religion played a dual role in the class struggle. This is because religion somehow suggested that "political order was ordained by God, and it consoles the oppressed by offering them in heaven what they were denied on earth"<sup>1</sup>. Moreover, we are confronted with puzzles whenever the issue religion is raised such as: Is religion made by man or man-made religion? If religion is always shaped by the economic laws, what happens to the periods when religious trends have been a source of social criticism and through the process offered a new vision of human life which led to the transformation of culture and society? In search for satisfaction of our quest, we shall expose the influence of Hegel and Feuerbach on Marx for proper comprehension of his line of argument. We shall also give an appraisal of his theory of socialism and religion a alienation and then conclude.

## **Marx's Theory of Dialectical and Historical Materialism**

Marx's theory of dialectics was an idea associated with Hegelian philosophy, although Engels saw it as idea that originated from Heraclitus. This is because Heraclitus was of the opinion that "everything is and is not, for everything is fluid, is constantly changing, constantly coming into being and passing away. All is flux and nothing stays still. Nothing endures but change"<sup>2</sup>. However, dialectical materialism is the foundation of Marxist theorizing. It is a synthesis of Hegel's dialectics and Feuerbach's materialism blended with historicity. The development of a philosophy of history was one of the great achievements of Hegel's thought. According to Mahajan, "the word dialectical originally referred to the process whereby ideas are formed and clarified in the course of intellectual debate. A proposition or thesis is first advanced, and then challenged by a counter-preposition, or antithesis"<sup>3</sup>. And since both are apt to be partly true, the normal outcome of the ensuing discussion is a revised proposition or synthesis that combines the valid elements of each.

Marx saw dialectics as the essence of the matter. In contradiction to Hegel, Marx replaced Hegel's dialectics with his dialectical materialism. He came about this through the influence of Feuerbach's materialism. The combination of the two theories forms Marx's dialectical materialism. "The forces in conflict for Marx are no longer ideas or principles, but the more tangible interests of social classes in their struggle over the ownership and control of material resources"<sup>4</sup>. Marx believed that consciousness was determined by life and not the other way round. According to Mahajan:

The view of Marx was that matter and not spirit or idea, was the ultimate reality and society organized for production in which there was to be no exploitation of one class by another, was the goal of evolutionary process. The world by its nature develops in accordance with the laws of the movement of matter. He contended that different social ideas and theories which appeared at different period of history, were merely reflection of the material laws of society. Matter is active and not passive and moves by an inner necessity of its nature<sup>5</sup>.

Marx in the preface to 'A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy' stated that "it is not the consciousness of human beings that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness"<sup>6</sup>. Engels buttressed this point when he

contended that the dialectical materialism grasps things and images, ideas essentially in their sequence, their movement, their birth and death.

Engels in his dialectic of nature and following the Hegelian pattern of thesis, antithesis and synthesis summarized the dialectical materialism on the following three laws: the first is the transformation of quantity into quality. The second law is the material penetration of opposites. The last law is the negation of the negations. This shows the historical development that begins from thesis and grows to antithesis and finally matures into synthesis. These are the stages of development. This is equally feudalism, capitalism and socialism which represents an advance over the earlier stage. The internal contradictions of capitalism lead to socialism which is the negation of the negations.

In concluding dialectical materialism it must be noted that Marx and Engels never presented their interpretation of reality as being the absolute and final system of philosophy. This implies that they took it as superseding all former interpretations be it idealism or materialism. For Marx and Engels “science was not something which could ever attain a fixed and final form. If reality is a dialectical process, so is human thought, in other words, as it reflects reality and does not take refuge in an illusory world of eternal truths and fixed essences”<sup>7</sup>. Dialectical materialism of Marx and Engels showcases ideas that are not detailed. It is not scientific because it does not ensure what constitutes a thesis, antithesis and synthesis. Marx was more interested in law, politics and economics rather than philosophy. This might account for the lapses in Marxian dialectical materialism such as its adherence to a purely materialistic worldview.

Dialectical materialism is the world outlook of the Marxist-Leninist party. It is called dialectical materialism because its approach to the phenomena of nature, its method of studying and apprehending them, is dialectical, while its interpretation of the phenomena of nature, its conception of these phenomena, its theory, is materialistic. Historical materialism on the other hand is the extension of the principles of dialectical materialism to the study of social life, an application of the principles of dialectical materialism to the phenomena of the life of society, to the study of society and of its history.

Marx applied the principles of dialectical materialism to the phenomena of the study of society and its history. In his radical approach towards the Young Hegelian considered his work as a new premises. Both Hegel and Marx accepted the primacy of ideas. One believes that conventional ideas are constitutive ideas of reality, the other believes that such ideas

constrain and limit social development. Thus, Marx took a different starting point from Hegel when he said “the premises from which we begin are not arbitrary ones, not dogmas, but real premises from which abstraction can only be made in the imagination”<sup>8</sup>.

However, historical change for Marx is driven by changes in the relationships between economic classes of people; these changes, in turn, are driven by changes in the way people produce things. How things are produced determines what sorts of social classes of people these are and how these classes relate to one another, in every society. These relationships are ones of dominance and subordination. The mode of production and exchange was the final cause of all social changes and political evolutions, which meant that for minds or thoughts to change, society would have to change. Thus, material forces influence the class structure of society, and class conflict, in turn, is the engine that drives history forward from one epoch to the next.

Marx went further to contend that material conditions determine the forms taken by human consciousness. Consciousness is essentially a social product, and the form of society conditions the form of consciousness. According to Marx “consciousness is thus from the onset a social product, and remains same as long as men exist at all”<sup>9</sup>. The result of the increase of population which is fundamental to tribal consciousness is the division of labour. Any social organization of production involves specialization of tasks, the division of labour, and the consequent differentiation of forms of consciousness, amongst the different kinds of labour. Consequent to the division of labour is conflict which is a contradiction between the interest of one and the interest of the whole, and between one class and another. Historical development is the emergence of capitalist society.

Marx abandoned the theory that subject and object condition determined each other. He declared that understanding of things was basically sensual and passive, and only secondarily active and conceptual. Consequently, religion was conceived as the origin of all social evil. “The more an individual enriched the concept of God, the more he impoverished the self”<sup>10</sup>. Marxian atheistic nature was fuelled by Feuerbach’s humanistic critique of Hegelian dialectics. This led him away from idealism to materialism. Marx objected Feuerbach’s reduction of religion to its secular origins, without giving an explanation of the duality in human existence. Marx took money in place of God. “Money is the universal, self-contained value of all things. Hence, it has robbed the whole world, the human world as well as nature, of its proper value. Money is the alienate essence of man’s labour and life, and this alien

essence dominated him as he worships it”<sup>11</sup>. He was bent on the priority of economics to all other explanations and his analysis of economic factors as material and thus more scientific or more open to observation than others. This created difficulty in acknowledging the benefits of his idea.

More so, the materialist theory of history is meant as an activity in social science rather than philosophy. This may look startling as it ought to have attracted much enduring concentration on the part of philosophers. “Scientific theories may be of interest to philosophers as long as their assumptions are obscure or questionable not minding whether the purpose behind them are in no way philosophical”<sup>12</sup>. This indicates the existence of a fundamental bridge between Marxist theory of history and the explanations of the natural science. This is evident in Darwinian biology which houses what Marx’s theory lacks, that is, elaborating explanation.

### **Marx’s Theory of Socialism**

Socialism as a word was coined in the early part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Charles Fourier and Henri Saint-Simon were the first to advocate this in their doctrines. It was made popular in England during the time of Robert Owen. However, Marx remains the real founder of socialism. During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, politics was liberated from the medieval enslavement. During this period also, feudalism had been overthrown in Europe and capitalism was in the throes of the industrial revolution. Capitalism is a term which denotes a type of social organization anchored on generalized commodity production. This is where private ownership and control of means of production exist. Capitalism in one hand can be linked to the bourgeois spirit of calculation and rationality. On the other hand, it refers to the organization of production for the market. Marx never viewed capitalism from these angles. Marxian concept of it is basically different from other modes of production simply because of market anarchy and capitalist exploitation. There are two factors that are identified in the Marxist definition of capitalism. There are the use of wage labour and private ownership of the means of production. According to Marx “one who has no other property other than his/her labour power must, in every condition of society and culture, be the slave of others, who have made themselves the owners of the material conditions of labour. He/she can work only with their permission, thus live only with their permission”<sup>13</sup>

Capitalism revolutionized the techniques of economic production, reduced international barriers and created urban civilization. Despite this, he maintained that it had outlived its use consequent to the sufferings and hardship it had meted on man. He analysed the sufferings

within capitalism, which were anchored in its origin. That is, “the eviction of peasants from their land, the loss of their sources of income, their vagabondage, their assembling in cities where they had become dependent on starvation wages, and most significantly, the creation of the proletariat”<sup>14</sup>.

Marxism postulated a world of perfect capitalism. In this world there will be no monopolies, no unions, and no special advantages for anyone. Here every commodity works exactly its proper price and this proper price is its value. This is because the value of a commodity according to Marx, is the amount of labour it has within itself. It must be noted that everything is eventually reducible to labour, and all commodities, in this perfect system, will be priced according to the amount of labour, direct or indirect, that they contain. It is to ensure the actualization of this and to eradicate the capitalists’ domination of the proletariat that Marx went into revolutionary politics.

Marx advocated for revolution which he saw as “a social, technological, political, legal and ideological phenomenon”<sup>15</sup>. He also saw class struggle and revolution as the driving forces of history. Social class struggle is geared towards revolution. The bourgeois class would not surrender their wealth and political power of their own free will or through evolutionary way. This can only be achieved by the proletarians by the way of revolution. Revolution was seen as the only means of achieving suspension of exploitation and seizure of power from the bourgeois class. The exploiting class needs political rule to maintain exploitation. At the same time, the exploited classes need political rule in order to completely abolish all exploitation. This is the interest of the vast majority of the people, and against the insignificant minority consisting of the modern slave-owners the (landowners and capitalists}. Marx considered revolution as the only solution for the exploited class and this will pave way for socialism.

Marxism left some unresolved issues on revolution. One of these unresolved issues is the means by which the revolution is to be actualized and the nature of the political organization between the capture of power and the future society. A lot of options have been given regarding the means by which the revolution is to be brought about. “The following alternative solutions were proffered: violence, peaceful transition, unilateral action of the proletariat, alliance with the progressive bourgeoisie, creation of bourgeois democracy and immediate passage to a proletarian regime”<sup>16</sup>. Through the use of the state revolution will abolish exploitation and usher in a classless society.

Marx's socialism is also known as scientific socialism or communism or Marxism. Marx contended in the Manifesto that communism in this sense of word is essentially a theory of method. It seeks to lay down the principles upon which the transition from capitalism to socialism is to be accomplished and its two essential doctrines are the class war and revolution. That is, the forcible transfer of power to the proletariat. At this point Marx has got a general conception of what an overall theory of society would be. This he did outline in the German Ideology. This was to be a theory which saw social and political life, and their associated beliefs that is moral, aesthetic, and religious as a series of complex responses to the material conditions of life. That is, effectively the forms of economic existence.

In the Manifesto Marx and Engels tried to relate their account of economic historical development to the prospects for revolutionary politics. They are two ways in which they actualized this. Negatively, by distinguishing their communism from other reactionary, bourgeois or utopian forms of socialism. Positively by asserting the connection between communism and its historical embodiment, the class of the proletarians. According to Hampsher-Monk:

What according to Marx and Engels, made communism identified with the proletariat more than simply an ideal was the fact that the development of capitalism, an undoubted historical reality, required and promoted the development of a proletariat. The proletariat is an industrial working class, which, through the conditions of factory production was to be radicalized and brought more and more in contact with one another, rather than remaining apolitical, dispersed and isolated<sup>17</sup>.

They concluded that the fall of capitalism and the rise or victory of proletariat are inevitable. This is because the bourgeoisie produces seeds that are its own grave diggers.

They analysed the proletariat political leadership. They advised the working class to capture the state, destroy all privileges of the old class, and prepare for the eventual vacation of the state. In the Manifesto they stated:

We have seen above, the first step in the revolution by the working class is to raise the proletariat to the position of ruling class to win the battle of democracy. The proletariat will use its political supremacy to wrest, by degree, all capital from the bourgeoisie, to centralize all instruments of



production in the hands of the state, ie., of the proletariat organized as the ruling class; and to increase the total productive forces as rapidly as possible<sup>18</sup>.

They spoke of “to win the battle of democracy” because they do not regard democracy merely as a political system. They conceive democracy more as a process. It is a process which comes down essentially to a struggle for democracy. The later is never completed because democracy can always be carried forward or forced back. The aim of the struggle is to go beyond democracy and beyond the democratic state, to build a society without state power.

Marxism placed ‘the state’ in the same level as ‘democracy’. In other words the state is seen as a process and not an institution. According to Marx “it is nothing more than the form of organization which the bourgeois necessarily adopt both for internal and external purpose, for the mutual guarantee of their property and interest”<sup>19</sup>. This is why the proletariat has to capture it and use it to destroy the capitalist system. The workers should use it to transfer the control of the means of production from private to public hands and set up a centralized planned economy. This will be the stage of communism and the state wither away to find its place in the museum with bronze axe and spinning wheel.

In the communist society, capitalism is eradicated and freedom for all, equal right is restored. Marx contended that the actualization of this cannot be effective except by means of despotic inroads on the rights of property, and on the conditions of bourgeois production, by means of measures. These measures will vary in different ways and in different countries. Some of the measures as he articulated are:

Abolition of property in land and application of all rent of land to public purposes. A heavy progressive or gradual income tax. Abolition of all right of inheritance. Confiscation of the property of all emigrants and rebels. Centralization of credit in the hands of the state capital and an exclusive monopoly, etc<sup>20</sup>.

In replacement of the old bourgeois society, with its classes and class antagonisms, the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all. Marx saw this as the complete return of man to himself as a social being. It is the genuine resolution of the conflict between man and nature, and between man and man, between existence and essence.

To sum this section up, despite the bitter criticisms against Marxism, the fact remains that all ideologies of socialism got inspiration from Marxism. Marxism has created a great set-back to capitalism and imperialism. The labour unions or movements in the world received inspiration from Marxism. Consequent to Marxist ideology, many countries have made laws for the welfare of the workers. “Marx’s view has a great influence over Russia, China and many countries of Eastern Europe like East Germany, Poland, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, Finland, Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia”<sup>21</sup>. Communist revolutions had taken place in these countries and the entire social and governmental set-up had been shaped according to the teaching of Marx. Marxism was influential to different countries of the world where the communist parties had carried out revolution.

### **Religion as Alienation**

The concept “Alienation” was of paramount importance for Hegel and all Hegelians. Hegelian system is all about the ‘philosophical mind’, a mind which we now know to be itself a product of an alienated society. Marx in ‘Essay on Money’ stated that:

The greatness of Hegel’s Phenomenology and its final product, the dialectic of negativity as the moving and creating principle is on the one hand that Hegel conceives of the self-creation of man as a process, objectification as loss of the object as externalization and the transcendence of this externalization ... he grasps the nature of labour<sup>22</sup>.

He went further to identify that it is the content of Hegel that is wrong. This is because Hegel saw the human essence as self-consciousness, but this is not regarded as itself an express of man’s real alienation.

However, what does alienation mean? It means isolation and self-estrangement. It is also interpreted as powerlessness, meaninglessness and normlessness. The concept of alienation includes a view of human relationship not based on the principle of equality but of one man being superior to another, one man a master and another a slave. Alienation for Marx was not man’s failure to realize himself or the outcome of religious superstition. It has to do with man’s work. For a simpler comprehension of alienation, the following illustration will do us a favour. In executing a project such as government house or an ex-governor’s palace, labourers are employed/hired. The workers will give in their labour even beyond the value of their payment. They will do this as long as you hire them until the completion of the project.

The completion of the project is followed by its commissioning or opening ceremony. The problem sets in from this very moment. These labourers will be denied access into the opening ceremony let alone being recognized. Thus, they are alienated from their own product. They will be seen as a class of people who are not qualified for the function. It was such that made Marx say that “using the very words of political economy we have demonstrated that the worker is degraded to the most miserable sort of commodity; that the misery of the worker is in inverse proportion to the power and size of his production; ...”<sup>23</sup>

Marx following Feuerbach’s materialism which sees God as man’s imaginative creation, saw religion as alienation. Marx saw religion as that which was created by the capitalists to alienate the proletariat from their labour. It was created to console the working class. Marx’s critique of religion exposes the fact that “the condition of human life was in such a way that man was forced to create an ideal world in order to make the real world tolerable”<sup>24</sup>. This was why Engels contended that religion had a prehistoric stock. Feuerbach maintained that religion simply refers to man’s separation from his personal self. Man has to make God man for him to realize himself again. This is because religion is man’s self-alienation and this is responsible for man’s immaturity. Marx took this line of thought but condemned Feuerbach’s lack of sociological comprehension. Marx felt that Feuerbach should have put into consideration the social reasons why man projects the best within him into the nature. Thus, Marx deviated from both Hegel and Feuerbach when he maintained that religious alienation is the outcome and reflection of social alienation instead of its producer. Marx’s concept of religion was influenced by his believe that religion played a vital role in social alienation.

Marx in his criticism of religion was convinced that man created religion. Religion never made man. According to him “religion is the self-consciousness and self-esteem of man who has either not yet found himself or has already lost himself again”<sup>25</sup>. It is both state and society that produced religion. It is simply a mere source of consolation and justification. Man illusively believes that his religious identity is reality. Man’s invention of God in religion resulted to the alienation of himself from himself. According to Engels, religion is nothing other than “the fantastic reflection in men’s minds of those external forces which control their daily life, a reflection in which the terrestrial forces assure the form of supernatural forces”<sup>26</sup>. The implication of Marx’s concept of religion when he saw it as ‘the sigh of the oppressed creature’ is that if man is socially comfortable and well to do, he will not tend to be religious. This is because the gods are personifications of the powers that dominate human life. When the powers no longer dominate man, there will no longer be

gods. For him, religion constitutes man's problem in the society and at the same time consoles him to accept the misery. According to Uchgbue, "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"<sup>27</sup>. Despite this, Marx admits that there is something good about religion. He recognized the fact that it consoles the working class in their miserable and dehumanizing conditions. Religion is the opium of the people. Marx advocated for the elimination of religion in the manner that capitalism should be overthrown.

### **Evaluation and Conclusion**

It is an obvious fact that combination of Hegel's dialectics and Feuerbach's materialism influenced greatly Marx's concept of socialism and religion. It is also a fact that the cultural and Economic practice in Europe during the 19<sup>th</sup> century influenced Marx thought. The capitalist acquisition of wealth to the detriment of the proletariat was so obvious during the era that Marx could not tolerate it. Marxism attacked capitalism from different perspectives. It criticised capitalism on the following: social aspect, ethical point of view, aesthetic ground, economic grounds, psychological and political grounds. His hatred for capitalism led him to a search for a better system which will create equality. This resulted to his theory of socialism and communism which is his final submission. Marx attacked religion in the same way he attacked capitalism believing it was one of the tools used by the capitalists.

However, Marx's idea of religion should not only be seen negatively. This is because he never set out to attack the Christian God per se. He attacked the corrupted leaders, those who exploited the masses in the name of religion and those who monopolized political powers in the name that it was divinely ordained. These were so common during his era. Marx's teaching is even more evident in the Christian religion of today. Cases of religious leaders exploiting their members abound. There is no church that can be exonerated from this obvious fact. However, it is evident in the protestant churches, where a lot of their founders fly on private jets. There is no doubt that the money used in purchasing those jets and other expensive cars and houses were extorted from the poor members of their congregation. They do this by promising them of heavenly reward. Marx's commitment to the liberation of humanity was so intense that he would have been one of the best Christians ever had. But that would have been possible if he had mixed his theory with a little of religion. Religion advocates the freedom of man from eternal damnation by teaching human peaceful co-

existence whereas Marx advocates man's freedom from his fellow man's exploitation which entails peaceful co-existence without hurting each other. But Marx's approach renders him an atheist. This notwithstanding, he stood for the dignity and worth of human life.

Moreover, Marx committed fallacy of hasty generalization in his submission on religion. His experience of the cultural and economic situation of his environment which affected the way religion functioned there led him into general conclusion on the genesis, essence and validity of religion. Marx's view that God's existence is an illusion lacks philosophical conclusion because he never established premises that should have led to the conclusion. Despite all these short falls, Marx's view that religion was created for the exploitation and other sorts of dehumanization in the society remains a sociological key pointer to the new religious phenomena found in the society today. The role Marx assigned to religion in the society makes it a necessity for man's existence. It is nearly impossible for man to create in this world a society that will have no element of suffering or oppressed. The existence of suffering calls for consolation. Thus, the need for religion to serve as the opium of the people.

In conclusion, we have appraised Marx's dialectical and historical materialism which form the basis of his theory of socialism and religion as alienation. We also linked this to Hegel's dialectics and Feuerbach's materialism. Through the influence of these philosophers Marx was able to create his ideology. Marx was much concerned about human existence. Thus, he fought for man's freedom from exploitation. In an attempt to liberate people he ended up rejecting God and religion. He saw capitalism and religion as the greatest enemy of man in the society and set out to abolish them. However, our findings in this paper indicate that total acceptance of Marx's view of man in the society and of religion as articulated in his dialectical materialism and economic views is misleading. This is because his views on these issues are not totally in line with the general conception of human nature and the essence of religion. The ideal communism which Marxism advocated for is unrealizable in this world. Consequently, there is need to join the moving train in the "common search ... to find an adequate ontology in which man might be more truly placed"<sup>28</sup>. More so, in the recent time, Christian religion has moved into liberation theology which Marx would have aligned to, if he had not deviated.

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