

Marx and religion: A brief study

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Marx's most famous statement about religion comes from a critique of Hegel's *Philosophy of Law*:

Religious distress is at the same time the expression of real 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*.¹

This is often misunderstood, because the full passage is not used. The quote is presented dishonestly by most people as 'Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature...' leaving out the 'heart of a heartless world.' This is more a critique of society that has become heartless and is even a partial validation of religion that it tries to become its heart. In spite of his dislike towards religion, Marx did not make religion the primary enemy of his work and thoughts; if he had regarded religion as a more serious enemy than would have devoted more time on it.

In the above quotation Marx is saying that religion's purpose is to create illusory fantasies for the poor. Economic realities prevent them from finding true happiness in this life, so religion tells them that this is OK because they will find true happiness in the next life. Although this is a criticism of religion, Marx is not without sympathy: people are in distress and religion provides solace, just as people who are physically injured receive relief from opiate-based drugs.

The problem is that operation fail to fix a physical injury unless it tries to solve the underlying causes of the problem. Similarly, religion does not fix the underlying causes of people's pain and suffering, instead, it helps them forget why they are suffering and causes them to look forward to an imaginary future when the pain will cease instead of working to change circumstances. Even worse, the oppressors who are responsible for the pain and suffering are administering this 'drug'. Religion is an expression of more fundamental unhappiness and symptom of more fundamental and oppressive economic realities. Hopefully, humans will create a society in which the economic conditions causing so much pain and suffering would be eradicated and, therefore, the need for soothing drugs like religion will cease.

The quote is not negative as most portray. Marx offers a partial validation of religion in that it tries to become the heart of a heartless world. Religion is a set of ideas, and ideas are expressions of material realities. Religion is a symptom of a disease, not the disease itself. Marx's relationship with and ideas about religion are more complex than most realise.

¹ Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right, K Marx.

To understand Marx's relationship with and ideas about religion, we need to explore the idea of 'alienation' in Marx's critique of religion.

The idea of alienation

The concept of alienation is deeply embedded in all the great religions and social and political theories of the civilised epoch, namely, the idea that some time in the past people lived in harmony, and then there was some kind of rupture which left people feeling like foreigners in the world, but some time in the future this alienation would be overcome and humanity would again live in harmony with itself and Nature.

Generally defined, alienation is a constraining process on human consciousness, arresting the development and ultimate potential of what human consciousness should properly be.

We can give the following definition of alienation: it is the negative process by which a subject makes himself other than himself by virtue of a constraint which is capable of being removed on the initiative of the subject himself.²

Marx was concerned about the nature and process of alienation and he examined different types, how it happened and how it could be solved. Alienation can be grouped as product-alienation (resulting in fetishism) and self-alienation (resulting in religion). Product-alienation was a symptom of work-alienation (due to exploitation and dehumanisation) and these alienation types inflamed alienation-from-others, alienation-from-nature and alienation-from-species-being.

It is beyond the scope of this essay to explore in details all various forms of alienation, but they all relate to each other (e.g. alienation-from-nature results in alienation-from-species-being) and are in turn related to the 'false religious consciousness', which is the symptom of suffering caused by all types of alienation.

...the Marxist theory of alienation reveals certain ambiguities of major relevance. In one aspect (A) it presents itself as the outcome of a scientific analysis of a complex of socio-anthropological phenomena, which are linked to a determinate mode of production. In another (B) it assumes the character of a metaphysical prophecy to the effect that alienation will disappear once the advent of communist society has removed the cause of economic alienation. Even if one confines aspect (B) to romantic eschatology and retains only aspect (A), the ambiguities are not finished with, because within (A) we have the alternative of either (A.1) seeing the Marxist theory of alienation as the simple denunciation of a phenomenon termed 'economic alienation,' together with a suggestion as to the techniques for its removal (the passage from a capitalist to a communist economy) – and in this case one would leave the problem of the continued existence of other forms of alienation wholly undetermined, and thus too the problem of their possible connexion with economic alienation; or else (A.2) seeing in the Marxist restriction of the theory of alienation to an examination of economic alienation, an explicit recognition of the assumed inexistence of other forms of alienation deserving of investigation. Thus three possible interpretations of the Marxist theory of alienation present themselves:

- 1) It is the outcome of an enquiry which neither in its assumptions nor its predictions transcends the sphere of the verifiable (A.1);

² Sartre and Marxism, P. Chiodi, Harvester Press Ltd 1976, p. 80.

- 2) It is the implicit negation of the continued existence of other forms of alienation (A.2);
- 3) It is the assumption that economic alienation is the metaphysical principle of the causation and removal of every other form of alienation (B).³

'Marx viewed religion as a transformation, indeed a deformation, of reality'⁴ therefore the term 'false religious consciousness' is used in this essay.

Life determines human consciousness, therefore a mislead or manipulated life results in a mislead or false consciousness, 'it is not consciousness that determines life, but life that determines consciousness.'⁵ Furthermore a false consciousness is often due to the trappings of 'herd consciousness'⁶, that type of consciousness, which results from humans associating with humans, and their religions.

In brief let us look at the alienation as product-alienation (resulting in fetishism) and self-alienation (resulting in religion).

Product-alienation (resulting in fetishism)

What constitutes the alienation of labour? First, that the work is external to the worker, that it is not part of his nature; and that, consequently, he does not fulfil himself in his work but denies himself, has a feeling of misery rather than well-being, does not develop freely his mental and physical energies but is physically exhausted and mentally debased. The worker, therefore, feels himself at home only during his leisure time, whereas at work he feels homeless. His work is not voluntary but imposed, forced labour. It is not the satisfaction of a need, but only a means for satisfying other needs. Its alien character is clearly shown by the fact that as soon as there is no physical or other compulsion it is avoided like the plague. External labour, labour, in which man alienates himself, is a labour of self-sacrifice, of mortification. Finally, the external character of work for the worker is shown by the fact that it is not his own work but work for someone else, that in work he does not belong to himself but to another person.⁷

Marx in his Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts⁸ identified four specific ways in which alienation pervades capitalist society. Four aspects of alienation are: a) The work-alienation (product of labour); b) The alienation-from-others (labour process); c) The alienation-from-nature; and d) The alienation-from-species-being.

a) The work-alienation (product of labour)

The worker is alienated from the object he produces because it is owned and disposed of by another, the capitalist. In all societies people use their creative abilities to produce objects, which they use, exchange or sell. Under capitalism this becomes an alienated activity.

...the worker cannot use the things he produces to keep alive or to engage in further productive activity... The worker's needs, no matter how desperate, do not give him a

³ Sartre and Marxism, P. Chiodi, Harvester Press Ltd 1976, p. 131.

⁴ Marxism and Religion, D. McLellan, The Macmillan Press Ltd 1987, p. 162.

⁵ The German Ideology, Marx-Engels Collected Works, Vol. 5, p. 37.

⁶ The German Ideology, Marx-Engels Collected Works, Vol. 5, p. 44.

⁷ Early Writing, K. Marx, London, 1963, pp. 124-125.

⁸ The Paris Manuscripts.

licence to lay hands on what these same hands have produced, for all his products are the property of another.⁹

Marx argued that the alienation of the worker from what he produces is intensified because the products of labour actually begin to dominate the labourer. Rubin outlines a quantitative and a qualitative aspect to the production of commodities, he explains:

In exchange for his creative power the worker receives a wage or a salary, namely a sum of money, and in exchange for this money he can purchase products of labour, but he cannot purchase creative power. In exchange for his creative power, the worker gets things.¹⁰

The creativity is lost to the worker forever, which is why under capitalism work does not stimulate or invigorate them, and 'open the door to unconquered territory', but rather burns up their energies and leaves them feeling exhausted.

...the alienation of the worker means not only that his labour becomes an object, an external existence, but that it exists outside him, independently of him and alien to him, and begins to confront him as an autonomous power; that the life which he has bestowed on the object confronts him as hostile and alien.¹¹

Under capitalism, those who work harder increase the power of a hostile system over them. They themselves, and their inner worlds, become poorer.

The worker becomes an ever-cheaper commodity the more goods he creates. The devaluation of the human world increases in direct relation with the increase in value of the world of things.¹²

b) The alienation-from-others (labour process)

Marx identified, the second element of alienation, is a lack of control over the process of production. Workers have no say over the conditions in which they work and how their work is organised, and how it affects them physically and mentally.

...activity as passivity, power as impotence, procreation as emasculation, the worker's own physical and mental energy, his personal life - for what is life but activity? – as an activity directed against himself, which is independent of him and does not belong to him.¹³

The process of work is not only beyond the control of the workers; it is in the control of forces hostile to them because capitalists and their managers are driven to make workers to work harder, faster and for longer.

...in a society based upon the purchase and sale of labour power, dividing the craft cheapens its individual parts.¹⁴

The capitalists' bosses also have an interest in breaking down the labour process into smaller and smaller parts. The resulting process buries the individual talents and skills of the worker.

⁹ Alienation, B. Ollman, Cambridge University Press, 1996, p. 143.

¹⁰ Essays on Marx's Theory of Value, I. I. Rubin, Black Rose Books, 1975, p. xxv.

¹¹ Early Writings, K. Marx, Penguin, 1975, p. 324.

¹² How to Read Karl Marx, E. Fischer, Monthly Review Press, 1996, p. 67.

¹³ How to Read Karl Marx, E. Fischer, Monthly Review Press, 1996, p. 327.

¹⁴ Labour and Monopoly Capitalism, H. Braverman, Monthly Review Press, 1974, p. 80.

Factory work exhausts the nervous system to the uttermost, it does away with the many-sided play of the muscles, and confiscates every atom of freedom, both in bodily and intellectual activity [...]. The special skill of each individual insignificant factory operative vanishes as an infinitesimal quantity before the science, the gigantic physical forces, and mass of labour that are embodied in the factory mechanism and, together, with that mechanism, constitute the power of the master.¹⁵

In Modern methods of production, using resources of science and the various engineering disciplines, managers still have a monopoly of control over the production process.

The unity of thought and action, conception and execution, hand and mind, which capitalism threatened from its beginnings, is now attacked by a systematic dissolution employing all the resources of science and the various engineering disciplines based upon it.¹⁶

Conditions of work, from the length of the working day to the space workers occupy, are also predetermined.

The entire work operation, down to its smallest motion, is conceptualised by the management and engineering staff, laid out, measured, fitted with training and performance standards – all entirely in advance.¹⁷

Workers are treated as machines, with the aim of transforming the subjective element of labour into objective, measurable, controlled processes. Here is an example of white-collar work:

In consequence of the rationalisation of the work-process the human qualities and idiosyncrasies of the worker appear increasingly as mere sources of error when contrasted with these abstract special laws functioning according to rational predictions. Neither objectively nor in his relation to his work does man appear as the authentic master of this process; on the contrary, he is a mechanical part incorporated into a mechanical system. He finds it already pre-existing and self-sufficient, it functions independently of him and he has to conform to its laws whether he likes it or not.¹⁸

c) The alienation-from-nature

This alienation arises in part because of the antagonisms, which inevitably arise from the class structure of society.

If his activity is a torment for him, it must provide pleasure and enjoyment for someone else [...]. If therefore he regards the product of his labour, his objectified labour, as an alien, hostile and powerful object which is independent of him, then his relationship to that object is such that another man - alien, hostile, powerful and independent of him - is its master. If he relates to his own activity an unfree activity, then he relates to it as activity in the service, under the rule, coercion and yoke of another man.¹⁹

In addition, people are connected to others through the buying and selling of the commodities workers produce. People are related to each other not as individuals but as representatives of different relations of production, the personification of capital, or land or labour.

¹⁵ How to Read Karl Marx, E Fischer, Monthly Review Press, 1996, pp. 58-9.

¹⁶ Labour and Monopoly Capitalism, H. Braverman, Monthly Review Press, 1974, p. 171.

¹⁷ Labour and Monopoly Capitalism, H. Braverman, Monthly Review Press, 1974, p. 180.

¹⁸ History and Class Consciousness, G Lukacs, Merlin, 1971, p. 89.

¹⁹ Early Writings, K. Marx, Penguin, 1975, p. 331.

We do not know each other as individuals, but as extensions of capitalism: 'In bourgeois society capital is independent and has individuality, while the living person is dependent and has no individuality.'²⁰

Marx described how mass commodity production continually seeks to create new needs, not to develop human powers but to exploit them for profit.

Each attempts to establish over the other an alien power, in the hope of thereby achieving satisfaction of his own selfish needs...becomes the inventive and ever calculating slave of inhuman, refined, unnatural and imaginary appetites. He places himself at the disposal of his neighbour's most depraved fancies, panders to his needs, excites unhealthy appetites in him, and pounces on every weakness, so that he can then demand the money for his labour of love.²¹

d) The alienation-from-species-being

Under capitalism labour is forced, which means work bears no relationship to workers personal preference or collective interests. The capitalist division of labour massively increased workers ability to produce, but those who create the wealth are deprived of its benefits.

It is true that labour produces marvels for the rich, but it produces privation for the worker. It produces palaces, but hovels for the worker. It procures beauty, but deformity for the worker. It replaces labour by machines, but it casts some of the workers back into barbarous forms of labour and turns others into machines. It produces intelligence, but it produces idiocy and cretinism for the worker.²²

Human beings are social beings, have the ability to act collectively to further their interests; however, under capitalism that ability is submerged under private ownership and the class divisions it produces. Human beings have the ability to consciously plan their production to match what they produce with the developing needs of society or nature, but under capitalism that ability is reversed by the anarchic drive for profits, consequences of their actions sometimes causes problems for nature or society (e.g. new, cheaper techniques of production may, when repeated across industry, produce acid rain or gases, which destroy the ozone layer). There is nothing natural about the economic crises world face. It is people's social organisation, which prevents workers to enjoy the potential of their ability to produce.

Self-alienation (resulting in religion)

Religious distress is at the same time the expression of real distress and also 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 condition. It is the opium of the people.²³

This opiate is used to calm the jangled nerves of the distressing self-alienation that feeling that one is being exploited, fetishizing products over concerns for others and being dehumanised in work. This opiate is the path of least resistance taken by the

²⁰ Alienation, B Ollman, Cambridge University Press, 1996, p. 144.

²¹ Early Writings, K. Marx, Penguin, 1975, p. 359.

²² Early Writings, K. Marx, Penguin, 1975, p. 325.

²³ Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law, K. Max, p. 175.

downtrodden people to make the disorientation of self-alienation more bearable. Religion, then, can be seen as a form of escapism, a misguided attempt to ease an uneasy life.

Marx's account of religion contains two strands:

- Religion as an illusory protest, whispering false hopes and eternal forgetfulness against the actual and exploited conditions of life; and
- Religion as ideology, where religion distorts and masks the socio-economic reality of the world.

Marx's examination of religion and alienation was intricately involved with his examination of human socio-history and economic or political contexts, any discussion of a Marxist religious critique must involve some understanding and discussion of these issues also. Marx in his writings uses the term estrangement (a separation from something, to stand as a stranger toward something). Alienation and estrangement are inter-changeable. Let us be aware of the influences of Hegel, Feuerbach and Bauer on Marx.

Hegel's Influence on Marx

Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich (1770-1831), the most important representative of classical German philosophy; represented an objective idealism; a brilliant investigator of the laws of dialectic, which he was the first consciously to apply. Marx wrote:

My dialectic method is not only different from the Hegelian, but is its direct opposite. To Hegel, the life-process of the human brain, i.e., the process of thinking, which, under the name of 'the Idea,' he even transforms into an independent subject, is the demiurgos of the real world, and the real world is only the external, phenomenal form of 'the Idea.' With me, on the contrary, the ideal is nothing else than the material world reflected by the human mind, and translated into forms of thought. [...] The mystification which dialectic suffers in Hegel's hands by no means prevents him from being the first to present its general form of working in a comprehensive and conscious manner. With him it is standing on its head. It must be turned right side up again if you would discover the rational kernel within the mystical shell.²⁴

Hegelian examination of history was in the light of the metaphysical Geist (Absolute human consciousness), and its estrangement from itself. Hegel was the most important philosopher of the nineteenth century and Marx believed Hegel had discovered a general historical law – the 'dialectic'. Note that it is taken from Plato's use of the word and developed as a theory of historical processes following the schema of 'thesis', 'antithesis' and 'synthesis', a triad of development followed by reaction followed by resolution, but Marx applied this 'dialectic' scientifically rather than metaphysically, as Hegel had done. Marx, too, explained history as a process of alienation, but due rather to economic (or materialistic) mechanisms. Hence his 'Dialectical Materialism' and the interpretation of history as class struggle rather than national antagonism.

...alienation is the fundamental feature of consciousness throughout its history.²⁵

Bauer's influence on Marx

²⁴ Capital Volume One, K Marx.

²⁵ Existentialism, D. E. Cooper, Blackwell Publishers Ltd 1996, p. 26.

Bruno Bauer (1809-1882), a Young Hegelian, was a German theologian, philosopher and historian. He studied directly under Hegel until Hegel died in 1831. Hegel once awarded the young Bruno Bauer an academic prize for a philosophical essay criticizing Immanuel Kant. Bauer attempts to explain the ambiguity of Christianity. The nearer that religious consciousness approaches to truth, the more it alienates itself therefrom. It takes the truth that is only to be attained to in self-consciousness away from self-consciousness and places it against self-consciousness, as though it were something alien to it.²⁶ The concept of alienation, or estrangement, was particularly important in Bruno Bauer's thought, and it was he who was responsible for the expression 'self-alienation', which was much used by the Young Hegelians.²⁷

Marx as one of his forms of alienation borrows this term. Marx claimed that class division caused social problems, all of which resulted in alienation. Alienation occurs because, due to exploitation the worker externalises himself in his work, meaning he has objectified the world of production he has laboured in, which then becomes alien and despotic.

...the poorer he becomes himself in his inner life... the less he can call his own. It is just the same in religion. The more man puts into God, the less he retains in himself.²⁸

An effect of this alienation is an illusory consciousness, related to an essentially delusional religious belief.

Feuerbach's influence on Marx

Feuerbach, Ludwig (1804-1872), as a member of the 'Young Hegelians', criticised what he called Hegel's reduction of Man's Essence to Self-consciousness, and went on to prove the connection of philosophical idealism with religion. In rejecting Hegel's philosophy and advocating materialism, criticising religion and idealism, Feuerbach emphasised the individual, purely 'biological' nature of man. He saw thought as a purely reflective, contemplative process, and in his understanding of history remained an idealist. Feuerbach criticised Hegel, claiming his position was one of 'rational mysticism'.

...while he agreed that there was no ontological distinction between the human and the divine, argued that the relationship had been stated upside down [...].²⁹

Feuerbach claimed religion was 'the dream of humanity' and God a 'projection', by which he means that the characteristics of the divine were human characteristics objectified, theologically systematised and abstracted into an illusory realm. Nevertheless, his critique of Hegel's idealism laid the basis for Marx's work.

Feuerbach is the only one who has a *serious, critical* attitude to the Hegelian dialectic and who has made genuine discoveries in this field. He is in fact the true conqueror of the old philosophy. The extent of his achievement, and the unpretentious simplicity with which he, Feuerbach, gives it to the world, stand in striking contrast to the opposite attitude (of the others).

²⁶ The Young Hegelians and Karl Marx, D. McLellan, The Macmillan Press Ltd, 1980, p. 58.

²⁷ Karl Marx and Religion, T. Ling, The Macmillan Press Ltd 1980, p. 9.

²⁸ Marxism and Religion, D. McLellan, The Macmillan Press Ltd 1987, p. 16.

²⁹ Karl Marx and Religion, T. Ling, The Macmillan Press Ltd, 1980, p. 8.

Feuerbach's great achievement is:

- (1) The proof that philosophy is nothing else but religion rendered into thought and expounded by thought, i.e., another form and manner of existence of the estrangement of the essence of man; hence equally to be condemned;
- (2) The establishment of *true materialism* and of *real science*, by making the social relationship of 'man to man' the basic principle of the theory;
- (3) His opposing of the negation of the negation, which claims to be the absolute positive, the self-supporting positive, positively based on itself.³⁰

Feuerbach at the end of his life joined the German Social Democratic Party, but he retained his differences with Marx to the end. Nevertheless, his contribution to the revolutionary movement should never be forgotten.

The objective essence of religion

Objectification in terms of alienation theories:

Objectification, as that which is carried out by a subject, is in every case a source of alienation.³¹

Because of this objectification, humanity is divided against itself, and so due to this ontological schism results the creation and reinforcement of the state of alienation.

The objective essence of religion, particularly the Christian religion, is nothing but the essence of human, and particularly Christian feeling, the secret of theology therefore is anthropology [...].³²

Marx developed this idea of objectification as an illusory belief.

The abolition of religion as the illusory happiness of the people is the demand for their real happiness. To call on them to give up their illusions about their condition is to call on them to give up a condition that requires illusions. The criticism of religion is, therefore, in embryo, the criticism of that vale of tears of which religion is the halo.³³

Marx argued that humans are the creations of their circumstances and creators of their circumstances.

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 encyclopaedic 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.³⁴

³⁰ Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844, K. Marx.

³¹ Sartre and Marxism, P. Chiodi, Harvester Press Ltd 1976, p. 88.

³² Karl Marx and Religion, T. Ling, The Macmillan Press Ltd, 1980, p. 8.

³³ Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law, K Marx, p. 175.

³⁴ Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law, K Marx, p. 175.

'Man makes religion' is related to Marx's idea that certain circumstances and creations are false or misguided. 'They, the creators, have bowed down before their creations.'³⁵ Religion then, is a mode of production but an alien product (see the product-alienation), unrelated to human reality.

This material, immediately perceptible private property is the material perceptible expression of estranged human life. Its movement – production and consumption – is the perceptible revelation of the movement of all production until now, i.e., the realisation or the reality of man. Religion, family, state, law, morality, science, art, etc., are only particular modes of production, and fall under its general law. The positive transcendence of all estrangement – that is to say, the return of man from religion, family, state etc., to his human, i.e., social, existence. Religious estrangement as such occurs only in the realm of consciousness, of man's inner life [...].³⁶

All of this indicates that religion is an ideology, a term Marx developed through his investigations of the philosophical inversions of Hegel and Feuerbach, in his discussion of the Camera Obscura³⁷ and through his emphasis on the active rather than the abstract and his notions of objectification. Note that, if in all ideology men and their relations appear upside-down as in a Camera Obscura, this phenomenon arises just as much from their historical life-process as the inversion of objects on the retina does from their physical life-process. Religion is just one form of ideology, which does not describe true human reality, but a false human reality. This is an essential idea behind Marx's concept of alienation (see the aspects of four alienation). The ideology of religion (as a part of the superstructure) is related to and casts an illusion; through objectification as a result of exploitation. This concept of ideology illustrates Marx's concern with bringing the claims of philosophers down to earth and to humanise abstract concepts. This is why he criticised Hegel's Geist and Feuerbach's philosophical abstractions. Man is no abstract being encamped outside the world. Man is the world of man, the state and society. Marx's philosophy is a philosophy of action and empirical observation in the spirit of Protagoras' thought, 'Man is the measure of all things'³⁸.

To understand that everything is explained in human terms, these terms can be distorted or lacking, one must return to the quote: '...the poorer he becomes himself in his inner life... the less he can call his own. It is just the same in religion. The more man puts into God, the less he retains in himself.' (See Bauer's influence on Marx).

This objectified alien world is that of the products of labour of the worker which humans 'fetishize'. This consumerist obsession with commodities is a mistaken values system, where objects are valued more than people, and people are exploited to make these very products. This exploitation is one of the social problems we initially considered and is made possible due to the class system and division of labour in the capitalist society. This exploitation is mainly due to the Theory of Surplus Value, the worker lacks Capital, so he forced to sell his labour as a commodity. The difference between the amounts of economic value he produces and the amount he receives for this is 'surplus value'. The employer takes the surplus value for himself. This is exploitation for profit and the source of social conflict and alienation. The reason why exploitation leads to alienation is due to the dissatisfaction with life and the enforced nature of work, which necessarily depersonalises.

³⁵ The German Ideology, Marx-Engels Collected Works, Vol. 5, p. 23.

³⁶ Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844, K. Marx, p. 297.

³⁷ The German Ideology, Marx-Engels Collected Works, Vol. 5, p. 36.

³⁸ Theaetetus, Plato.

The domination of the thing over man, of dead over living labour, of the product over the producer...at the level of production...we find the same relationship as obtains at the level of ideology, in religion: the subject is transformed into object and vice versa.³⁹

Due to the highly technical, but uncontrollable, world of industry, people become unhappy over things that are meant to create happiness. All of this results in damage to human 'inner life', which is perhaps synonymous with consciousness, which becomes alienated from itself due to this damage and the above reasons. Alienation is therefore an important concept as it illustrates not only that capitalist society is failing, but also that religion is essentially the symptom of suffering and delusionment caused by exploitation.

Essence of human

In religion people make their empirical world into an entity that is only conceived, imagined, that confronts them as something foreign. This again is by no means to be explained from other concepts, from "self-consciousness" and similar nonsense, but from the entire hitherto existing mode of production and intercourse, which is just as independent of the pure concept as the invention of the self-acting mule and the use of railways are independent of Hegelian philosophy. If he wants to speak of an "essence" of religion, i.e., of a material basis of this inessentiality, then he should look for it neither in the "essence of man", nor in the predicate of God, but in the material world, which each stage of religious development finds in existence.⁴⁰

The Marxist idea of alienation presupposes a human essence from which humanity can be alienated, a 'proper' or 'correct' way of life from which humans can be torn. If it did not, to speak of alienation would be meaningless, as humans have to be alienated from something. Furthermore, this human essence was not spiritual.

...the essence of man is no abstraction... it is the ensemble of the social relations.⁴¹

Feuerbach and Hegel had their versions of human essence, the Reason, Will and Love and Geist respectively. We can see Marx as a proto-sociologist who perceived certain patterns of interrelation between material and mental realities. From this he postulated that the human essence was a socio-economic relation with others, a productive relationship, but so far an exploitative one, set in a historical context.

...man cannot enter into an authentic relationship with himself except on condition of entering into a particular relationship with others [...].⁴²

Here, the Marxist use of the term 'authentic' means real or not alienated. This particular relationship is one without religion in a reciprocally productive and communist society. Marx's account of human essence is similar to his contemporary Herbert Spencer.

What does distinguish his account is its context – very specific idea of what is real – 'the religious production of fancies' contrasted with 'the real production of the means of subsistence' and human nature as alienated.⁴³

³⁹ Marxism and Religion, D. McLellan, The Macmillan Press Ltd, 1987, p. 25.

⁴⁰ The German Ideology, Marx-Engels Collected Works, Vol. 5, p. 160.

⁴¹ Thesis on Feuerbach, Marx-Engels Selected Works, Vol 1, Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1969, p. 7.

⁴² Sartre and Marxism, P. Chiodi, Harvester Press Ltd 1976, p. 128.

⁴³ Marxism and Religion, D. McLellan, The Macmillan Press Ltd, 1987, p. 21.

Religion, for Marx, is first seen as a fantasy of alienated human beings and later seen as class ideology, which under communism would vanish.

...religion was viewed as a symptom with meaning that needed deciphering through some kind of 'geneology'.⁴⁴

There are problems with Marx's account of religion and alienation. Perhaps the most problematic is Marx's relativist attitude towards consciousness; he views consciousness as socio-historical.

Does it require deep intuition to comprehend that man's ideas, views and conceptions, in one word, man's consciousness, changes with every change in the conditions of his material existence, in his social relations and in his social life?⁴⁵

If values of consciousness are relative to each society, this includes his own, indicating that his ideas cannot be understood as an objective and absolute benchmark for measuring the 'reality' of consciousness. Marx has no justification for any attempt to establish broad, general laws of history. Marx does not show for certain that communist historical processes are inevitable, nor can he provide a valid basis for predicting the end of religion (through the advent of communism) and therefore de-alienation.

...led him to over-optimistic and sometimes straightforwardly false estimations of the present and future state of religious belief, as when, for example, after blithely equating the proletariat with 'the masses of men', he claimed that their religious ideas 'had long been dissolved by circumstances'.⁴⁶

And

...religion can also be a protest against alienation and exploitation... But it does not follow, for the Marxist, that there could be good religion or bad religion – just as there could be good politics or bad politics.⁴⁷

Furthermore

To abolish religion as the illusory happiness of the people is to demand 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 vale of tears, the halo of which is religion.⁴⁸

Marx's critique is of an epiphenomena of reality, superfluous, abstract and not in touch with reality. Marx's quest for humanism has excluded a principle the possibility of God.

Your question is itself a product of abstraction. Ask yourself how you arrived at that question... When you ask about creation of nature and man, you are abstracting, in so doing, from man and nature. You postulate them as non-existent, and yet you want me to prove them to you as existing... your abstraction from the existence of nature and man has no meaning.⁴⁹

⁴⁴ Marxism and Religion, D. McLellan, The Macmillan Press Ltd, 1987, p. 160.

⁴⁵ Manifesto of the Communist Party, p. 503.

⁴⁶ Marxism and Religion, D. McLellan, The Macmillan Press Ltd, 1987, p. 21.

⁴⁷ Marxism and Religion, D. McLellan, The Macmillan Press Ltd, 1987, p. 168.

⁴⁸ Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law, K. Marx, p. 176.

⁴⁹ Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844, K. Marx, p. 305.

This problem of a principle exclusion noted is not so damning. Anthony Flew's philosophy of 'Falsification' illustrates how the responsibility of proof for God rests on the believer. Therefore Marx is under no obligation to accept religious language.

One of the most difficult tasks confronting philosophers is to descend from the world of thought to the actual world. *Language* is the immediate actuality of thought. Just as philosophers have given thought an independent existence, so they were bound to make language into an independent realm. This is a secret of philosophical language, in which thoughts in the form of words have their own content. The problem of descending from the world of thoughts to the actual world is turned into the problem of descending from language to life.⁵⁰

Furthermore, Marx's critique of religion as alienation works insofar as we accept his definition of human essence and his examination of human relations in their socio-historical context.

Conclusion

Religion is like other social institutions in that it is dependent upon the material and economic realities in a given society. It has no independent history; instead it is the creature of productive forces. 'The religious world is but the reflex of the real world.' Religion can only be understood in relation to other social systems and the economic structures of society. In fact, religion is only dependent upon economics, nothing else, so much so that the actual religious doctrines are almost irrelevant. This is a functionalist interpretation of religion; understanding religion is dependent upon what social purpose religion itself serves, not the content of its beliefs.

⁵⁰ The German Ideology, Marx-Engels Collected Works, Vol. 5.