

**Classical Sociological Theory**  
**Professor R. Santhosh**  
**Department of humanities and Social Sciences**  
**Indian Institute of Technology, Madras**  
**Lecture 23**  
**Karl Marx and Religion**

Welcome back to another on Karl Marx and in this class we are going to discuss one of the most fascinating topics that is Marxian take on religion and arguably this could be one of the most controversial positions of Karl Marx. Marx's characterization of religion has sparked controversies over these so many decades.

I hope all of you know about Marx's use of the term religion as the opium of masses. This has become an extremely popular characterization or an extremely popular statement of Marx both celebrated as well as despised, criticized by different sections depending upon people's orientation towards religion.

This is also the statement where Marx as well as his idea of communism has been subjected to so much of criticism that inherently communism is against religion of course you have had quite a lot of historical reasons to support these arguments because most of the communist countries including China and Russia they were opposed to religion in a very explicit manner.

What do we mean by or how do we understand Marxian position on religion. This is a very interesting argument. What does Marx mean when he say that religion is opium of masses. Did he equate religion with a drug? Did he say that once somebody consumed religion they lose their mind, what did he mean by that?

Much beyond the easy characterization of Marx, as somebody who equated religion with opium or equated religion with drug, the position is much more nuanced. The Marxian take on religion is more nuanced and very fascinating take and personally I found that explanation extremely important.

Marx provides a very powerful materialistic explanation of the way in which human beings find happiness, human beings find a sense of satisfaction, sense of importance, a sense of self-worth

in their own life. And his arguments about religion is very closely connected with his argument about alienation.

That is why I decided to have these sessions one after the another because the arguments are very close.

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- Religion was never a central concern for Marx
- 'Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right' (1844)
- 'Concerning Feuerbach' (1845)
- 'Social Principles of Christianity' (1847)
  
- Writings of the 'Young Marx'



We know that religion was never a central concern for Marx unlike the later sociologist whom we are going to discuss including Max Weber or Emile Durkheim. For both these people the study of religion was something so central to their intellectual exercise.

They all had written books on religion but for Marx, religion was not a central concern and you will find Marxian references on religion scattered across many of his writings. He did not write anything very systematically with focusing on religion per se. So you will find most of his important writings on religion in his critique of Hegel's philosophy of right in 1844, concerning Feuerbach 1845, social principles of Christianity 1847 and all these things as you know are considered to be the writings of the Young Marx.

The Marx in his youthful time who was heavily influenced by larger philosophical and ethical questions or heavily influenced by Hegelian idea before the emergence of this so-called matured Marx who went into some of the most rigorous and systematic economic analysis of capitalism that he explained through his three volume works called Das Capital.



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## Engagement with Hegelians

- The debate among 'Right' and 'Left' Hegelians regarding the 'highest forms of human consciousness'.
- Influence of Bruno Bauer and Ludwig Feuerbach. While the former pondered over the question of the existence of God, the latter wanted to understand religion as it is the 'human essence'.



Marx began his discussion on religion with a very intense theoretical engagement or theoretical debate with both right and left young Hegelians regarding the highest form of human consciousness. We discussed that the entire Hegelian philosophy revolves around the whole idea of human consciousness. He argued that the European society during that his time has reached this highest form of consciousness.

For Hegel that was the evidence for the human process and he was also influenced by Bruno Bauer and Ludwig Feuerbach while the former pondered over the question of existence of God the latter wanted to understand religion as it is the human essence. We know that that was a time when the division between philosophy and social sciences was not very clear.

The thinking of social scientists also were very much influenced by the kind of philosophical orientations and that quite a lot of social scientists were very significantly influenced by religious beliefs. Being a believer, Hegel's influence on social science was something very profound so Bruno Bauer was a believer whereas Ludwig Feuerbach he was not a believer.

And in the previous class when we discussed Feuerbach's take on alienation, we found that he adopts a kind of an anthropological approach trying to understand why that the idea of god or the idea of religion is omnipresent in every society. Feuerbach tried to understand that why human

beings project a host of human essence and human qualities to God and then feel inferior to of about oneself.

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- Marx critiques Feuerbach for presenting an asocial idea as human essence does not exist in isolation.
- God exist or not is a theological concern and not sociological.
- His argument is idealist



So Marx criticizes Feuerbach for presenting an asocial idea of human essence which does not exist in isolation. So while Marx agrees with the Feuerbach that the reason for the emergence of society must be understood through a materialist explanation and there is no divine origin to religion.

Religion is not something handed over by any god because there is no god exists but on the other hand you need to look at the material conditions which generated or which gave birth to this ideas of religion and God. So Marx criticizes Feuerbach for presenting an asocial idea as a human essence does not exist in isolation. God exist or not is a theoretical concern and not social.

It is a very important argument and we know that the distinction between theology and sociology. Sociology does not ask the question whether god exists or not because that is a question which sociology cannot answer and to a large extent sociologists are not interested in answering because what is more important is the consequences of certain beliefs that God exists or conversely the consequences of the belief that God does not exist.'

Because whatever be the truth the beliefs in God or that the lack of belief in God have very specific consequences on the society and that is what sociology studies. So most of the sociologists might take a position about the existence of God in their personal realm but as a discipline, sociology cannot answer the question whether God exists or not. That is the realm of theology and you know that is an unending system of interpretations arguments and counter-arguments and controversies.

It is a mind field which sociology does not want to get into but sociology is interested in the consequences of certain belief or the lack of belief. Because each of these types of beliefs are extremely consequential. These beliefs have very specific consequences on the society and that is what sociology is interested.

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- For Marx, the fundamental question was the true nature of human existence.
- To 'overthrow all relations in which man is a debased, enslaved, forsaken, despicable being'.



And he argued Feuerbach's arguments are idealist though his argument was not idealist in the sense of the way in which we understand the Hegel's argument. So Marx the fundamental question was the true nature of human existence. This is dear to Marxian scheme of things. You know that Marx identified that the human beings are not living the way they ought to be living.

Human beings are being given a very raw deal by the capitalist system. So he wants to understand that system and he wants to understand religion as a manifestation of that kind of system. So he wants to overthrow all relations in which man is a debased, enslaved, forsaken,

despicable being and that is a powerful idea. You will see how idealist Marx is or how Marx is politically charged.

He is hoping for a utopian society, society which may never come into existence. But he was very strongly persuaded by that idea. He was very strongly motivated by the idea to overthrow all systems in which man is a debased, enslaved, forsaken, despicable being is overthrown and a far better society is realized.

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### 'A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right'



The foundation of irreligious criticism is: *Man makes religion, religion does not make man. Religion is indeed the self-consciousness and self-esteem of man who has either not yet won through to himself or has already lost himself again.... This state and this society produce religion, which is an inverted consciousness of the world, because they are an inverted world.*

The struggle against religion is therefore indirectly the struggle against *that world whose spiritual aroma is religion.*



I am going to use a couple of passages from Marxian writing and his contribution the critique of Hegel's philosophy. And these passages are something so revealing, there is something so important because it not only explain Marxian position or religion but they are beautifully written. They are extremely beautiful, the structure, the idea of the arguments are extremely beautiful. So we will spend some time trying to understand that. So Marx argues what is the foundation of irreligious criticism or what is the foundation of irreligious criticism of religion.

Man makes religion, religion does not make man. It is a very clear statement. It is a religion is a man-made belief system. The whole institution of religion is purely created by human being there is nothing divine about it. It is not divine revelation, God did not want religion since there is no God. Even if God wants or not, there is no God. The religion, just like any other human institutions is purely created by human beings.

Religion is indeed the self-consciousness and self-esteem of man who has either not yet won through to himself or has already lost himself again okay. Beautiful argument or a very beautiful statement. Religion is indeed the self-consciousness and self-esteem of man who either not yet won through to himself or has already lost himself, implying that it is the state and society produce religion which is an inverted consciousness of the world because they are an inverted world.

So Marx argues that religion emerges in such situation where human beings are either yet to realize their true self-consciousness or true self-esteem or they have already lost it. Please keep in mind here that he is talking about self-consciousness. He is not talking about self-consciousness the way Hegel talks about it as Marx's idea of self-consciousness cannot be attained by modifying your way of thinking.

Marx is talking about a completely different set of things. The state and this society produce religion in a completely alienated and completely unjust world, a world which is characterized by exploitation and oppression. And this is the world that is creating religion and because this is an inverted consciousness of the world because they are in an inverted world. So for Marx, the system of capitalism is not the true state of affairs where human beings must find themselves, it is an inverted world.

In this inverted world, you will find religion as a reality because it is an inverted consciousness of the world. The struggle against the religion is therefore indirectly the struggle against that world whose spiritual aroma is religion. So the struggle against religion is therefore indirectly the struggle against that world whose spiritual aroma is religion.

It is a very interesting argument because Marx says that the religion provides a kind of spiritual aroma to an extremely oppressive world. And here you can think about the typical Marxian criticism against Christianity. Christianity many times glorifies poverty, and offers heaven to the people who toil.

There are several such quotation from bible. The oppressed and the poor are the people who are dearer to the god and who are more close to the heaven. For Marx, religion is the spiritual aroma of a very cruel world.



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*Religious suffering is at one and the same time the expression of real suffering and a protest against real suffering. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people.*



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*.



Religious suffering is at one and the same time the expression of real suffering and they protest against real suffering. Religion is the sigh of oppressed creature, the heart of the heartless world and the soul of soulless condition. It is the opium. So here we come across that particular statement, but keep in mind that this sentence alone could be misleading. This sentence alone could be misleading because it gives you an impression that Marx equates religion with opium and something that is bad and something should not be kept giving.

But he is saying something more substantial than that. So religious suffering is at one at the same time the expression of real suffering and the protest against the real suffering. So Marx is not dismissing religion as something insignificant. Marx says that religion is something so important and very real.

Religion is something so real and important because religious suffering is at the same time, the expression of real suffering because the real suffering exists and the world in which we live is a world of suffering. And in such a world religion is bound to be there. Religion is bound to exist and it is also a protest against the real suffering.

‘Religion is a sigh of oppressed creature, the heart of the heartless world and the soul of soulless condition’, these are beautiful statements. Religion is a sigh of the oppressed creature. When we

see religious fervor across the globe in every religious denominations, we feel that people are becoming spiritually enthralled but for Marx it is a sigh of oppressed creatures.

They are looking for certain remedies of their oppression. Religion is the heart of a heartless world and the soul of the soulless condition and it is the opium of the people. So Marx specifically say that religion is a false consciousness. Religion is a false consciousness because this false consciousness is necessitated by the economic condition and Marx also believed that the moment you address the root cause, the moment you address the economic exploitation and then bring in equality, religion will disappear.

It is a very provocative and important argument which has given rise to so much of criticism and debate especially in the larger argument of you know secularization thesis. We will discuss that in detail when we discuss Max Weber, whether the world is moving towards a secular world when the economic status improves.

Imagine the society where there is very less inequality and economic standard is very high, what would be the condition of religion there. But there are very interesting research which shows the significant systematic decline of religion in some of the most developed societies especially like Norway, Sweden, Switzerland many of these Nordic societies.

The number of people who claim to be irreligious or non-religious status is steadily increasing. Now the abolition of religion as the illusory happiness of the people is the demand for their real happiness. So the criticism against the region is not a criticism directed against religion per se but the abortion of religion as an illusionary happiness of the people is the demand for their real happiness.

But to call on them to give up their illusion about their condition is to call on them to give up a condition that requires illusion. There are some interesting debate about social services or charity activities of religion for example take the case of mother Teresa. She is white, she is a Nobel Prize winner and widely celebrated as a symbol of saintness and spent her time her entire life taking care of the poor.

But a Marxist would argue that she did not ask the question why poverty exists, and as long as people do not ask that question, the system will only create more and more poor people and then

taking care of them will not really resolve the issue unless you radically address the question of why poverty exist in the first place. Why that we are creating more and more poor people. Why we creating more and more destitute people.

Can we have a different set of social structure where poverty can be eliminated and that takes away the discussion from compassion from charity from benevolence into a whole set of politically loaded questions about the distribution, social justice, about the income egalitarianism, a host of politically loaded questions.

Marx says that to call them on to give up the illusions about their condition is to call on them to give up a condition that requires illusion. The criticism of religion is therefore in embryo the criticism of that veil of tears of which religion is a halo. So the criticism of religion is not directed against this is a per say but it is a criticism against a social scenario which makes religion more glorified or which present religion as a solution or which presents religion as something more important.

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Criticism has plucked the imaginary flowers on the chain not in order that man shall continue to bear that chain without fantasy or consolation but so that he shall throw off the chain and pluck the living flower....

It is therefore the task of history, once the other-world of truth has vanished, to establish the truth of this world. It is the immediate task of philosophy, which is in the service of history, to unmask self-estrangement in its unholy forms once the holy form of human self-estrangement has been unmasked. Thus the criticism of heaven turns into the criticism of earth, the criticism of religion into the criticism of law and the criticism of theology into the criticism of politics.



Marx continues, 'Criticism has plucked the imaginary flowers on the chain not in order that man shall continue to bear that chain without fantasy or consolation but so that he shall throw off the chain and pluck the living flower'. So the criticism has plucked the Marxian criticism of religion has plucked the imaginary flowers on the chain not in order that man shall continue to bear the change without fantasy or consolation.

But so that he shall throw off the chain and pluck the living flower and one's the living flower, living flower is the progress of an egalitarian society where people no longer require the consolation of religion. It is therefore the task of history once the other world of truth has vanished to establish the truth of this world. So he argues therefore it is a task of the history once the other world of truth has vanished what is the other world of truth?

The truth that is being told to humanity by all the priests of all religion that your misery in this world is temporary. The real existence is after your death and maybe except Buddhism, every other religion has this very strong belief in life after death and every religion has very vibrant description about the hell and the heaven about reaching nirvana about reaching a moksha in Hindu methodology or reaching salvation in Christianity and so on.

Being an atheist himself, Marx completely rejects that kind of an idea. For him, there is only one life and that life is what you live in this earth. There is nothing beyond the death, a person's life

comes to an end with the death, there is no soul, there is no atma, there is no heaven, there is no hell, there is no salvation, there is no punishment after somebody's death, there is no previous birth, there is no birth after one thing.

All these are completely unfounded arguments as per Marxian logic. So therefore the task of history once the other world of truth has vanished to establish the truth of this world and what is the truth of this world? The truth of this world is to lead a non-exploitative equal life where the labor is appreciated, labor is celebrated people are not seen as commodities. The products are not seen as commodities.

According to Marx, It is the immediate task of philosophy which is in the service of history to unmask self-estrangement in its unholy forms. Once the unholy forms of human self-estrangement has been unmasked. He is calling out philosophy to reveal the true nature of human beings and again in his true materialist spirit Marx says that this true form can be broken only when you change the world, the material aspect of the world, not some kind of changes in your mind.

Thinking positively or spiritually is not going to help, rather change must be brought into the material condition. Thus, the criticism of heaven turns into the criticism of earth. The criticism of the heaven, the criticism of the God turns into the criticism of earth because the Marxian criticism of God is not aimed at criticizing the God because God or the religion is only a reflection of the kind of sad affairs of this particular earth.

So the criticism of heaven turns into criticism of earth, the criticism of religion into the criticism of law, the criticism of religion turns into the criticism of law, law Marx makes it in the into a more broader term the kind of arrangement that we ourselves have made. The kind of social system the kind of social arrangement that we ourselves has made which perpetuates the system of inequality.

Marx says the criticism of law is essentially the criticism of religion. He understand the criticism of law the criticism of theology into criticism of politics. So criticism of theology is basically a criticism of politics. So he makes it very clear that he has no time to discuss about the nuances of theological explanation because this whole theological explanation is unwanted .

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- Problematizing the 'Opium' as mediating the expression and protest of people.
- Alienation and religion-
- Religion as ideology in the superstructure
- Later Marxian tradition emphasised only religion as expression of interest and not of suffering and protest.
- Religion was seen as expression of class interest and social control.



When you sum up Marxian criticism of religion by only looking at the metaphor of opium is problematic. Because Marx is not dismissive, Marx is not condemning religion but Marx is more sympathetic to religion. Marx is sympathetic to religion because Marx knows that as long as the social exploitation exists, religious belief is bound to happen because it provides certain kind of solace to the people.

A temporary solace to the people, an illusion of solace to the people and Marx also is very clear that religion is not giving you any true sense of solution. It is only the kind of an illusion that you think all your worries are being taken care. You think that you are assured a place in the heaven or you are assured that you will not be punished and after your death you get peace of mind.

But for Marx it is only illusion. You only get an illusionary like a drug like opium might give you. But any drug, as you know does not really change the reality. It is only your personal perception of reality that changes for some time and after some time you come back to the reality.

So for Marx religion offers you some kind of solution but these solutions are illusionary because after some time you are back to the material condition which would be as harsh as the previous one and very close connection with the religion and alienation and the religion as an ideology in

the superstructure. Again we know that Marx understands a religion as something very firmly placed in the superstructure and not something a part of the base.

He believed that in a classless society in a post-capitalist society, religion will have no significance because people did not require religion. Religion will disappear not because of the criticism against religion or not because of the systematic assault of religion but people themselves will leave religion because they will find it longer necessary.

But of course later Marxian tradition emphasizes only religion as an expression of an interest and not of suffering and protest so that is why there are quite a lot of discussion of Marx as being insensitive to religion. Later Marxian analysis of course revolved around this particular idea that religion is seen as a class interest and social control and along with the bourgeoisie class how religion really appropriates people.

Marxian take on religion is something very important because he fiercely places the critique against religion in the material world, where he argues that the philosophical, epistemological foundation of social analysis must be firmly rooted on the material world of office of times. So let us conclude this session and we will move to the next one in the next class. So thank you.