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Religion as Premise for Revolution: Refinement, Challenge

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Abstract:
This essay examines the relationship between religion and revolution in Marx's work. Incorporating the point made in Marx's work that breaking the illusion of religion is the only means to revolution, this essay explores how refining and challenging religion catalysts revolutionary actions. For Marx, man recognizing religion as part of the superstructure shaped by material conditions, and mobilizing collective class consciousness are the important premises for revolution. The essay highlights how transformations in the economic base could reshape religious emphasis from obedience to advocacy of reforms. This illustrates how religion could become a catalyst for social change when confronted with material contradictions. In other cases, challenging the sacred nature of religion also means to normalize social structure and realize all social structure is a product of man. This self activation realization helps set up the groundwork for revolution. Ultimately, the essay argues for religion's potential to fuel revolution through being refined and affirm humanity's ability to reshape social orders through being challenged.

Keywords: Religion, Revolution, Superstructure, Material conditions, Forces of Production, Class conflict, Class consciousness, Authority, Legitimacy, Marx

Throughout human history, religion operates as the central explanatory framework. Religion explains why the world is as it is, and why it should remain. For instance, in pre-modern Europe, the Great Chain of Being reinforced a hierarchy ordering God, kings, nobles, commoners, and animals and inanimate matter (Asım, 2022). This vision reinforced the existing hierarchies as the cosmic order. As such, they frame societal hierarchy not merely as political arrangements, but also as reflections of eternal truth.

Religion in this context was a comprehensive ontology. What "truly exists" was validated by divine authority. If a kingdom prospered, it was taken as proof of God's favor; if a ruler held power, it was because God had willed it. This belief provided a strong psychological mechanism for social stability. Questioning the legitimacy of existing structures meant questioning the order of the cosmos itself. In such a way, the existence of religion becomes the stabilizing stone for the society, maintaining the ruling class in power.

However, Marx famously argued that rejecting re-

ligion was a necessary step to awaken from the illusory world, confronting the real challenges of life, and questioning the legitimacy of the social order that was often protected or placed as sacred by religion. In his work A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right, he wrote: "The abolition of religion as the illusory happiness of the people is required for their real happiness (Marx, 1843)." Religion, in his view, masked injustice under the illusion of peace. To strip away this illusion is to see the real hidden issue, and realize the urgency of resolving the issue that catalyzes the revolution.

Revolution, for Marx, required premises. Relations of production (social classes, property systems) no longer match the forces of production(the actual means and capacity of economic life such as technology and economy)--in most cases, when the relations of production become a fetter on the forces of production, especially when this mismatch produce mass exploitation, class conflict intensified until the oppressed—workers or peasants—rose against the ruling class. In addition, Marx argued that though material conditions such as the mismatch between social structure and production set the stage for revolution, successful revolution requires conscious class action, which connects people to an unified ideologist on the spiritual level and empowers the revolution.

Religion, when refined or challenged, can intensify these conflicts by providing the moral justification to confront corruption and inequality. Religion could also be rejected outright, serving as a demonstration of humanity's power to repudiate inherited structures of authority. Thus, refining and challenging the established religion could fuel revolution through either providing a new moral ground that fuels actions or dismantling the unquestionable nature of authority.

Karl Marx consistently argued that religion is not the cause of social and economic arrangements, but their product. In The German Ideology (1845–46), Marx wrote:"Life is not determined by consciousness, but consciousness by life," and "the religious world is but the reflection of the real world" (Marx,1843). "Life" refers to the material world, which includes the mode of production, the distribution of labor, the ownership of resources. Religion belongs to the superstructure, which is the beliefs and institutions that stabilize the material base.

This means that religious ideas are shaped by the structure of society at a given moment rather than timeless truths. If the base change, such as a shift in the mode of production or a realignment of class interests, religion's narratives could shift accordingly to support stabilize the new societal needs For example, in the mid-20th century in Latin America, the economic base underwent a significant transformation from large scale agrarian society to industrial base, large scale urban migration and dependency on global markets (Forero & Tena, 2024). The economic transformation interrupted the established hierarchical system, and created a large number of urban workers who lived in impoverished urban centers. Those industrial workers experienced wage exploitations, land dispossessions and political repression under the system of feudal hierarchy.

Before this shift, the Church was historically aligned with political powers, and religious language frequently emphasised obedience to legitimate authority as part of God's order. However, the industrial transformation placed many clergy in direct contact with impoverished urban workers and displaced rural laborers. Confronting daily realities suffering of the lower class people made it harder for them to simply uphold the status quo (ibid.). This lived exposure to suffering pushed parts of the church to promote themes centered on the equal dignity of all people, the moral imperative to protect the poor, and the idea that social structures should reflect justice rather than privilege.

The economic base change created conditions where religion's emphasis shifted. In this example, from legitimizing elite authority toward advocating universal human dignity and structural change. In Nicaragua, priests such as Ernesto Cardenal taught that Christian duty required siding with the poor, a message that led believers to join the Sandinista revolution against Somoza (Berryman, 1994). Religion, once the stabilizer of hierarchy, became the spark that transformed the social structure. This demonstrates the point that change in material condition could reshape a religion to satisfy the new class interests.

If religion could serve as a stabilizer to create illusion as a means of maintaining hierarchy rule, it then could also be challenged outright as a demonstration of humanity's ability to repudiate inherited authority itself. For Marx, one of the most radical implications of revolution is that no institution, however sacred, is beyond human contestation. Religion historically embodied the "eternal" order of the cosmos, linking kingship, social hierarchy, and divine will into one seamless structure. To question the Church or the sacred hierarchy, then, was to question the very legitimacy of political and economic institutions.

"Religion is only the illusory Sun which revolves around man as long as he does not revolve around himself (Marx, 1843)." This quote from Marx illustrates his belief that the highest priority does not lay within religion but humanity itself. Question religion is to center man, allowing realization of his own power and meanings. Moreover, Marx argued that once religion is shaken, the foundations of political power are also inevitably weakened. As he explained: "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

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politics (ibid.).” Here, Marx shows how critique moves from the spiritual criticism to the material and social foundations. Religion exposed as religion indicates that meaning is not bestowed from beyond but created by man himself. By denying the sacred, humanity discovers itself as the founder of societal structures, knowing that the world is solely a human product, subject to transformation by human will. This insight naturally extends to the material base, implying individuals’ power of also shaping the economic relations, political institutions, and social orders according to their will. Religion functions as the sign of sacred legitimacy for social structures; to challenge it is to abolish that aura and reveal those structures as mere human constructions, subject to change.

Thus, in Marx’s sense, the rejection of religion is both an awakening from illusion and an empowering of class consciousness. Seeing all sacred powers as human constructions encourage people to confront the fragility of political authority built upon them. For corrupt governments, such recognition is dangerous, because their rule depends on weakening human autonomy and fostering dependence. Once people recognize themselves as subjects of thought and creators of meaning, the stability of ruling is threatened.

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