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# Marx and Religion

## Working Paper No. 4

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**Abstract:** This inquiry seeks to establish that, in his writings, Karl Marx offers his perspectives on religion. The origins of Marx’s conception of religion can be traced to his family history, adolescence, and time at the University of Berlin. Marx’s criticism of contemporary philosophy offers a penetrating account of his views on religion, proving critical of the individualism and idealism implemented by his contemporaries. In Marx’s judgement, religion offers a false sense of solace in a world marked by abuse. Religion rationalizes domination, sows societal divisions, and preserves oppressive institutions. Marx’s materialist approach focuses on the real-life relations and activities within society, without dogma or idealism. Thus, his empirical approach offers practical and rational solutions in the face of injustice. (words: 119)

***Journal of Economic Literature Classification Codes:*** B14, B31, Z12

**Key Words:** Hegelian Philosophy, Karl Marx, Ludwig Feuerbach,  
Materialist Approach, Religion.

This inquiry seeks to establish that, in his writings, Karl Marx offers his perspectives on religion. Though Marx's family history, time at the University of Berlin, and criticism of contemporary philosophy, his interpretation of religion can be better understood. This inquiry will reveal the possible origins of Marx's religious conception through his family's history, chiefly focusing on his father Heinrich Marx. The conversion of Heinrich from Judaism to Christianity appears to have left a powerful and lasting impression on Karl from a young age.

Additionally, through his criticism of Hegelian absolutism and other contemporary philosophy, Marx offers a penetrating account of his religious conception.

Although Marx's references to religion at times appear contemptuous, many elements of his criticism remain constructive. Thus, this inquiry will discuss the practical measures of Marx's materialist approach. Through consideration and discussion of these topics, Marx's perspectives on religion will prove apparent.

### **Origins of Marx's Conception of Religion**

Marx's conception of religion appears to be shaped by his family's religious heritage. Johnson (1987, 312) explains that Marx's family, on both his mother's and father's sides, was deeply rooted in Judaism. Marx's paternal grandfather and uncle were both rabbis. Marx's mother, Henrietta, descended from a long line of rabbis and scholars, reaching back to the sixteenth century. Preceding the

eighteenth century, Germany was divided into feudal principalities which highly limited the rights of its Jewish citizens. Marx's father, born Herschel Levi in 1777, remained subject to this discrimination until his middle teens. With the success of the Napoleonic Wars in the last decade of the eighteenth century, Germany came under the occupation of Napoleonic France.

Napoleonic Law allowed for the elevation of the rights and opportunities of Jewish citizens. With contemporary European thought reaching the small and isolated towns of Germany, Berlin (2013, 24, 25) reveals that Herschel became a student of the Enlightenment and a disciple of the French rationalists. Herschel established himself as a relatively successful lawyer, a profession previously restricted to Jews by the ruling Christian princes. With the defeat of Napoleon at the Battle of Waterloo in 1815, the Congress of Vienna assigned Prussian rule over Germany, subsequently reinstating the old discriminatory order. Under Prussia, the feudal monarchy and restrictive laws of the past were reestablished in Germany. Now, Marx's father had to either return to the Jewish standing of the old era or change his name and religion to maintain the life to which he had become accustomed.

Early in Herschel's life, he fully accepted the principles of the Enlightenment, diminishing his attachment to religion. Berlin (2013, 25) affirms that Herschel entirely detached himself from his family, changing his surname to

Marx and acquiring completely new friends and interests. In 1816, anti-Jewish laws were established under the new Prussian authority in Germany, halting the possibility for Herschel's entrance into the German bourgeois and his means of livelihood. By the next year, the Lutheran church of the Prussian regime had officially accepted Herschel – one year before the birth of his eldest son, Karl. Berlin (2013, 26) describes the elder Marx as possessing a timid, gentle, and accommodating temper, becoming a vehement Prussian monarchist and patriot. Following his baptism, he changed his first name to the Christian name Heinrich and provided his family with a liberal protestant education, loyal to the king of Prussia and the maintenance status quo. His father's conversion to Christianity, along with his overly accommodating and submissive behavior, left Marx with an everlasting sense of contempt, hostility, and resentment towards religion and a complete unwillingness for compromise.

Other aspects of Marx's childhood and adolescence in Trier remain influential in the formation of his views on religion. Although Heinrich's religious conversion and submissive nature did not sit well with his son, Berlin (2013, 27-29) expresses that aspects of his views remain apparent in Marx's social principles. In Heinrich's view, man exists as naturally rational and good, and maintaining these qualities requires the removal of artificial obstacles. Heinrich instilled a deep belief in philosophical rationalism and perfectionism into his son. Apparent early

on in Marx's life was a passion for empirical approach and lucid argument. This empiricism and lucidity allowed Marx to remain critical and independent of contemporary philosophy. Although influenced by ideas of Romanticism, Marx perpetuated concrete and realistic qualities of thought.

Upon the conclusion of his basic studies in Trier, Marx studied at the University of Bonn for a brief period and then transferred to the University of Berlin one year later. Berlin (2013, 32) stresses that Marx's move from the provincial towns of Trier and Bonn to the populous and modern town of Berlin presented a significant adjustment. The town of Trier, untouched by the expansive economic and social revolutions of contemporary Europe, existed from an older order. Whereas, the rapidly industrializing Berlin functioned both as the center of the Prussian bureaucracy and as the meeting place of radical intellectuals forming an expanding opposition. At that time, the philosophy of Hegel dominated German academic and intellectual circles. Berlin (2013, 60) explains that Hegelian philosophy emphasizes the study of history and criticism of social institutions. To Hegel, the more far-reaching the criticism, the more enlightened and self-conscious the critic.

Shortly after arriving at the University of Berlin in 1836, Marx dove into the study of Hegelian philosophy. Berlin (2013, 62-64) stresses that, after an exhaustive study of Hegel, Marx was entirely converted to the philosophy and

immersed himself into philosophical politics. Marx immediately identified with the Young Hegelians, a left-leaning section of Hegelian philosophers that held subversive views of political and religious orthodoxy. Marx quickly found himself at home in the group of free-thinking University of Berlin intellectuals, writing of contempt for the bourgeoisie, the king, and the Church – raising concerns from Prussian authorities. Marx, along with other members of this group, planned to launch a vicious atheistic campaign against milder radicals. He spent the remainder of his time in Berlin writing and editing for the radical newspaper *Rheinische Zeitung*. In the end, Marx's critical nature coupled with his never-ending study and deep contemplation eventually led to a distrust in the validity of Hegelian philosophy.

In his search for the truth, Marx proves affected by the work of Ludwig Feuerbach. Berlin (2013, 70-71) emphasizes that Feuerbach preserved empirical positions, employing a simple style which portrayed the real world. Feuerbach criticized Hegel's theory as inadequate and irrational in explanation, pointing out the obscure mysticism of the Hegelian Idea which was used to disguise the God of Christianity. Feuerbach declared that the force of history was not spiritual, but the aggregate of material conditions impose particular behavior upon a society. A society responds to material distress and unhappiness by seeking solace in immaterial conceptions that promise eternal bliss after death. To expose this

illusion, Feuerbach prescribes the analysis of material maladjustments, utilizing simple explanation in solely physical terms. Undoubtedly, Feuerbach's materialist approach left a lasting impression on Marx's work, which displays an everlasting sense of honesty, simplicity, and courage without fail.

### **Marx's Commentary on Religion and Criticism of Contemporary Philosophy**

In his infallible critical fashion, Marx critiques the contemporary German criticism of religion in *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right* [1844].

Marx (1974, 41) criticizes his contemporaries for solely focusing on man as an individual who constructs religion on his own. For Marx, man is not an abstract being who remains separated from society and alone in the world. Man creates the composition of a society, a state, and world. The society and the state produce religion, which Marx calls "a reversed world-consciousness". Religion exists as a general theory of the world, explaining logic, establishing moral sanctions, presenting a historical encyclopedia, and offering justification and consolation.

Here, Marx (1974, 42) famously describes religion as "the opium of the people".

Religion exists to inoculate the masses with a false sense of happiness and solace in a world marked by suffering and abuse.

In Marx's judgement, the false notions instilled by religion act to preserve oppressive institutions and sow divisions within a society. Marx (1974, 44, 45)

stresses that religion rationalizes domination by the state over the hard-working masses of society. In accepting a higher power in heaven, one also accepts the supremacy of earthly authorities and thus accepts divisions among classes and races. To Marx, these divisions are based on distrust and petty aversions sown by the illusions of religion. With continued belief and acceptance, these unnecessary injustices will prevail. Marx teaches that the maintenance of the status quo is simply the continuation of an ancient regime, disguised by the modern states of existing nations. In addition, false interpretations of history act to prolong these unjust concessions. Marx (1974, 47) remains critical of contemporary German philosophy for its idealistic conception of history. This idealism leads philosophers to reflect upon ideal notions of history instead of actual history, limiting and negating reflection on the actual conditions of life. Although the materialist approach sets out to remove idealist conceptions from history and philosophy, Marx highlights the short-comings of his materialist contemporaries.

In *Theses on Feuerbach* [1865], Marx criticizes materialist philosophy, including aspects of Feuerbach's reasoning. Marx (1974, 70) explains that existing materialist philosophy considers the existence of the human condition as a product of upbringing and particular circumstances. Therefore, people differ based on certain circumstances and upbringings. In Marx's judgement, Feuerbach failed to recognize that people also shape circumstances, they are not just simply shaped by

them. By utilizing a materialist approach such as Feuerbach's, society is divided into parts where one proves superior to another and human revolutionary activity remains excluded from analysis. Furthermore, Feuerbach's analysis completely dismisses the world of religion and only examines society on a secular basis. To understand society as a whole, such a separation cannot be made. Discovering the truth of human activity will lead to the discovery of why and how religion is constructed in the first place, then fundamental change can take place in society and philosophical theory.

In addition, Marx (1974, 71) stresses that Feuerbach's analysis isolates humans and his focus on merely the secular world proves in itself a form of idealism. The separation of society from religious activity and sentiments does not show actual society as a whole. It would be idealistic to remove religion from the analysis of society, thus Feuerbach's approach is non-materialist. To Marx, a true materialist views religious sentiments as social products. When theory is misdirected into mysticism, a rational solution exists in the study of human activity and understanding this activity. Marx (1974, 72) proposes that the understanding of human activity will transform idealistic and individualistic philosophy of civil society into a philosophy of human society and humanity in general. Marx asserts that his materialist approach provides a realistic interpretation of humanity and a means to transform it.

Marx's newspaper article "The Communism of the Paper *Rheinischer Beobachter*" [1847] criticizes the Prussian state and its use of Christianity as a tool of authority. Marx (1974, 83) notes how the social principles of Christianity dignified serfdom of the Middle Ages, justified slavery since time immemorial, and defended the oppression of lower working classes. Religion necessitates a ruling class and an oppressed class, and only suggests that the rulers remain charitable in regarding the oppressed. Marx (1974, 84, 85) insists that the Prussian government utilizes the principles of Christianity to justify their unscrupulous acts on earth. Religious principles instill dependence and preach self-contempt, submission, abasement, dejection, and cowardice. By moving away from the fantasy of religion, the masses would become aware of the abuses they are subject to and the unfair power structure could be repaired.

In a later article, "Anti-Church Movement – Demonstration in Hyde Park" [1855], Marx highlights how the Church, government, and businesses owned by the oligarchy collude and abuse the nineteenth-century proletariat in England. Marx (1974, 127) explains that obsolete and needless institutions, which should be falling from existence, work offensively to retain authority. To Marx, such proves to be the case with the English oligarchy and Church. Thus, the English oligarchy and Church work together to legislate measures of religious coercion. As an example of this coercion, Marx (1974, 128) discusses the Beer Bill and the Sunday

Trading Bill. The Beer Bill acted to close down all places that entertain the public on Sundays, excluding evening hours between six and ten. Priests gained the support of big public house owners by promising the continuation of their licenses, effectively sustaining their monopoly. The Sunday Trading Bill acted to disallow the operation of all shops on Sundays. This immediately captured support from large shop proprietors who were already closed on Sundays, eliminating the competition from small shops. These measures exist as religious penal laws that only effect the proletariat. In effect, these measures force the practice of Christianity upon the lower classes to the benefit of the oligarchy and Church, preserving the survival of unnecessary institutions.

### **Practical Dimensions to Marx's Materialist Approach**

Marx offers practical insights to his materialist approach in "The Leading Article of No. 179 of *Kolnische Zeitung*" [1842]. Marx (1974, 25) highlights the tendency of religions to find error in anything that contradicts their faith. In so doing, there remains no way to distinguish or prove claims between when there is no basis to agree upon. When no verifiable basis exists, argument is rendered useless. Thus, any philosophy that operates with religious principles or on its own dogmas encounters the same issue. Marx (1974, 26) holds that if philosophy recognized the existence of a "universal human nature," dogmatic philosophy would be avoided.

Philosophy asks what is true for all humanity, not just what is unique to individuals. Operating with such dogmas as religion sets boundaries to the examination of humanity. By leaving out dogmas and using an objective and empirical approach, the actual truths of the world can be found and verified.

Marx (1974, 42) proposes that religion exists as a reaction to the suffering and heartache of the real world. Religion acts as a drug, offering the relief of eternal life and happiness to the believer. Therefore, those who practice religion endure the exploitation and abuse of the systems that dictate their lives without protest. Marx teaches that the abolition of religion would cause such illusions of happiness to dissipate, whereby real happiness could be found. By giving up such illusions, abusive and oppressive systems become apparent and a better world can be created that does not require any illusions of happiness. The criticism of religion causes one to deliberate, act, and shape reality in a way which remains most beneficial. This reality will center around humanity and not an illusory world. A materialist world view leads to the criticism of religion to rights, then theology, and finally politics, giving way to a new era of humanity and human evolution.

In *The Holy Family, Or Critique of Critical Criticism* [1844], Marx explains the practicality of the materialist approach. Marx (1974, 67) believes that all humans possess equal intellectual abilities that remain influenced by environment, experience, and education. Therefore, humans naturally hold and exhibit the marks

of the materialist approach. If humans gain knowledge from their senses and experiences, then the empirical approach can create a greater consciousness within humanity. By cultivating awareness, humans can discover their own true interests and how they coincide with the rest of humanity. Furthermore, the materialist outlook renders religion unnecessary, dissolving the disagreements and divisions produced by it. Marx (1974, 72) trusts that materialism fosters a human-centric society with higher levels of humanity and empirically based institutions.

The *German Ideology* [1846] describes Marx's materialist approach. Marx (1974, 73, 74) claims that certain people who are productively active in certain ways participate in certain political and social relations. Empirical observation will reveal social and political connections and organizations around these relations, without any speculation or mystification. States and social organizations arise from the real-life processes of these individuals. The production of consciousness, ideas, and notions are directly related to the real-life activities and the communication between individuals in a society. Marx's materialist approach stems from these observations and recognizes that all forms of ideology correspond to these real-life processes and material conditions. Marx's approach considers the whole of normal human activity and its outcomes. Hence, the formation and evolution of religion, morals, and other forms of ideology can be traced to these conditions and process throughout history.

Marx remains critical of German philosophy's idealism of the history of humanity. To Marx (1974, 79), the basic human relation to nature has been left out of history, with common and mundane activities considered unworthy of history-making. Marx stresses that philosophers only considered basic human activities as incidental events, unconnected to the course of history. German philosophy only focused on the major official actions of the state and religion, chiefly theological battles. By utilizing the materialist approach, the true forces that cause specific societal formations can be determined. For instance, Marx attributes the caste system in India to a primitive division of labor. Instead of presupposing that religion precedes man, Marx (1974, 80, 81) considers the real-life production of means of subsistence as a driving force in history. Altered circumstances in society lead to a transformation in a society's real relations. The origins of history cannot be discovered with theoretical notions because the mass of humanity does not share these same notions. These idealistic notions and theoretical deductions are responsible for the production and preservation of unnecessary institutions. Empirical observation remains the only method of describing and analyzing the real history of humanity and solving societal issues.

## Conclusion

This inquiry has sought to establish that Marx offers his perspectives on religion through his writings. The influences in Marx's adolescence and early-adulthood explain the origins of his conception of religion. His father's conversion to Christianity and submissive actions left Marx with an immutable resentment and hostility towards religion and a permanent aversion to compromise. In addition, the Enlightenment principles that greatly influenced Marx's father and his father's friends remain apparent in his Marx's writing. During his time in Berlin, Marx's critical approach was honed by the study of Hegel and Feuerbach and through discussions with groups of free-thinking university intellectuals. Marx remained highly critical of the idealism of contemporary philosophy. He believed that religion existed as a general theory of the world, presenting a historical encyclopedia, establishing moral sanctions, explaining logic, and offering consolation and justification for the injustices of the world. Marx teaches that religion necessitates unfair divisions within society and acts to preserve oppressive institutions, forcing its practice upon lower classes to the benefit of the upper class. Marx's materialist approach focuses on the whole of humanity, leaving out idealistic notions and examining the actual truths of the world. This approach focuses upon *earthly* problems in order to reform broken and oppressive social systems.

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