

Reverse the Inverted World Consciousness to Normal: Marx's Theory of Religious Criticism

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Received 4 February 2015; accepted 5 April 2015

Published online 26 April 2015

Abstract

Religion is an interpretation of the existence of the universe and is a cultural phenomenon of divine faith and reverence. It has a long history and many believers in the world. In the eyes of the believers, "deity" or "God" is the highest and last refuge of human and the highest and last spiritual home for human. However, Marx reverses the "inverted world consciousness" to normal and believes that "man created religion rather than religion created man" and then through the religious criticism he exposes the reality of the secular world. He starts from the "practice" of "real people", profoundly reveals the essence of religious alienation of human, pointing out that only the complete elimination of private ownership and the alienation of labor can eradicate religion to make people get real liberation.

Key words: Marx; Religion; Religious criticism; Alienation; Human liberation

Li, H. X. (2015). Reverse the Inverted World Consciousness to Normal: Marx's Theory of Religious Criticism. *Higher Education of Social Science*, 8(4), 24-28. Available from: URL: <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/hess/article/view/6748>
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/6748>

INTRODUCTION

As a social phenomenon, the impact of religion on people's daily life is growing. Religious temple incense around has become increasingly prosperous. More and more people go to temples to pray. Is religion the spiritual

sustenance harbor of people or the shrine to let people get lost in the other side of the world? Feuerbach believes that religion is the self-alienation of essence of human class. Human created God in the image of their own and the religious world is an illusory performance of human's own nature, and is the imagination of the world which simply does not exist. Marx affirms the right aspects of Feuerbach and that is Feuerbach divides religious world into the secular world. However, Feuerbach does not further analyze why alienation occurs in the secular world and why there is a self-divided independent kingdom to form the world of God.

Marx reverses the "inverted world consciousness" to normal to realize the real liberation of human. He believes that "man created religion rather than religion created man" (*Selected Works of Marx and Engels [Vol.1]*, 2012, p.1). He starts from the "practice" of "real people" and drives people out of the "religious harbor" they depend on.

1. MAN CREATED RELIGION RATHER THAN RELIGION CREATED MAN

Where there is religion, there is thinking about religion. In these reflections, the first question to answer is "What the essence of religion is".

What is the nature of religion? Idealist philosophers believe some abstract and absolute concept as the source of religion, or they assert that people are born with the religious consciousness. Some of the old materialist thinkers reject the theological origin of religion, but they do not reveal the essence of religion. For example, materialist Feuerbach proposes that religion is the alienation of human essence; God did not create man, but man created God according to their own image, which completely negates the theological origin of religion and God. However, the "man" Feuerbach refers to is "abstract man" rather than "real man". Feuerbach examines the historical development from the "abstract man" and he

cannot reveal the essence of religion. In other words, Feuerbach does not start from the historical activities of people in reality to pursue the essence of religion, and he is unrealistic, through logical combination in the human brain to create the “abstract man” to pursue the essence of religion, which is bound to get a fantastic result from his fantasy.

Based on material production, Marx analyzes the nature of religion in the associated material conditions and social conditions, and gradually converts religious critique to the critique of the society which produces the religion. In other words, Marx starts from the “practice” of “real people” and reveals the essence of religion based on historical materialism.

Marx inherits Feuerbach and pulls the perspective to explore the nature of religion back to earth from heaven, but he abandons the gaze of Feuerbach who pays attention to “abstract” rather than “real people”. Feuerbach transforms God’s standpoint into human’s standpoint, finding that it is people who create religion, but his understanding of human has limitations. Feuerbach believes a religious self-alienation and he starts from the fact that the world is dually divided into the world of religion and the secular world. His job is to put religion into the world on its secular basis. However, the secular basis is separated from themselves, and it has been fixed in the sky as an independent kingdom, which can only be illustrated by self-division and self-contradiction of the secular basis (Ibid., p.134).

Marx believes that, “we should understand the secular basis from itself and from its contradictions, and to revolutionize it in practice. Thus, for example, since the discovery of the secret of the Holy Family in a secular family, secular family itself should be destroyed in theory and in practice.” (Ibid., pp.134-135) Marx affirms the right aspects of Feuerbach. In his view, self-division and self-contradiction of the secular basis is the real root causing the appearance of religion and only with the practical transformation of the secular basis can we eliminate religion. Thus, Marx points out that, “it is not religion that created man and it is man who created religion.” (Ibid., p.1)

Marx tries to find the essence of religion based on the “practice” of “real people”. “Real people” are those who are engaged in labor activities in the community, and they are free and conscious workers engaged in labor. “They are what they produce—it is consistent both with what they produce and how they produce them; therefore, what kind of individual is depending on the material conditions of their production.” (Ibid., p.147)

As individuals of life and real society, they exist through life and activities. Marx says that,

People, in order to ‘make history’, must be able to live a life; but in order to live a life, first of all they need to eat and drink as well as a few other things to live through; therefore the first historical activity is the production of these materials to meet the needs, and that is the production of material life itself.

Moreover, it is a historical activity people are engaged in every day from thousands of years until today to maintain a life, and it is the basic condition of all history. (Ibid., p.158)

In the real world, there is no man who lives without the community neither the community which exists without men. Man is the subject of society, and society is the object of man. Specifically, real man and social reality are an organic whole, and they can be relatively divided into the subject areas (real man) and object aspect (society). Any social reality is a unity of the subject and the object. This unity is not abstract or fantasy, but a concrete and historical unity.

What is the relationship between religion and “social reality”? Marx believes that, religion reflects social reality, and exists depending on social reality. Religious “unreal” has “real content”; in other words, the “unreal” comes from the “real content”, and the real content is the social reality. Religious “divine” is the symbol of social unity and reflects social reality. “Unreal” religion’s “sacred” symbol has real implications and material basis of social reality. Once the “society” has been destroyed, religion will demise following it. As Marx says,

Ancient religions demise with the demise of ancient countries, which does not need further explanation, because the “true religion” of the ancient nation is the worship of ‘their nation’ and their “country”. It is not the demise of the ancient religion that caused the destruction of ancient nations; by contrast, it is the destruction of ancient nations that caused the demise of ancient religions. (Ibid., p.213)

Religion is “inverted world consciousness”, existing in the “inverted world” where religion exists. In other words, the “social reality” is an “inverted world” and therefore it produces the “inverted world consciousness” — religion. As Marx says,

Religion is the self-awareness and self-feeling of those who have not yet got themselves or who have once again lost themselves. However, people are not abstract existences living outside of the world. People are the world of people and the state and the society. This country and this society produce religion, an inverted world consciousness, because they are an inverted world. ...religion is the realization of the essence of man in the fantasy, because human nature does not have a true reality. (Ibid., pp.1-2)

2. THE ALIENATION OF RELIGION OF PEOPLE

In various religious theological systems, especially in the various superstitions and cults, all kinds of gods and ghosts created by man dominate and alienate man himself, becoming the master and the “soul” of real man and a source of human values and destination. Religious concept is an illusion and distortion of real phenomena and events of social life. Religion in different historical stages changes with the influence of changes in the social system and social relations. In a class society, religion is

often utilized and controlled by the ruling class and the rulers paralyze the ruled class through religion.

On the basis of the relationship between "alienated labor" and "private ownership", Marx reveals the nature of capitalist society, and then from the social-political dimension explains religious alienation. It can be said that the roots of religious alienation is the production of "private ownership" and "alienated labor" of capitalist society. As Marx says:

The more strength workers put into their labor, the more force they have created that maybe used against themselves, the more powerful the alienated object world is, and the more impoverished the workers' own internal world becomes, and the less they own. The case of religion is the same: the more people are dedicated to God, the less they have left to themselves. (Ibid., p.51)

This labor does not belong to their own but others; the labor does not belong to them; in the labor they do not belong to themselves; they belong to others. In religion, the role of the human imagination, the human brain and the human mind in their own individual activities are not dependent on their own, that is, as some dissident activities, the activities of the gods or demons play a role, and the workers' activities are not their spontaneous activities. (Ibid., p.54)

Therefore, the "religious alienation" and alienation of labor reveal the alienation of "real people". The former distorts the human brain in the realm of the spirit, making the believers have faith in "God" or "deity"; the latter suppresses the human body in the real world, so that they obey the ruling of the "ruling class". From this we can see that, the nature of Marx's religion has dual meanings: the first is, in the field of ideology or thought, the issue of man's self-alienation in "holy image", and the other is, in the real world or the secular realm, the problem of man's self-alienation in "non-sacred image".

The existence of religion began in primitive society when classes have not yet appeared; in the communist society where classes have started demising, religion will continue to exist.

In the early primitive society, primitive religions appeared because in primitive society the level of productivity development was low; scientific knowledge was poor; and the practice range was small. Primitive man cannot correctly understand the external nature and the relationship between man and external nature. The worship of the sun and the worship of animals appearing in primitive religions belong to the worship of nature itself such as the totem worship. In the late primitive society, the emergence of "idolatry" was the human alienation from primitive men who owned more private property by means of "God". In slave society, feudal society and capitalist society, religion is often utilized and controlled by the ruling class; the ruled are often oppressed by rulers through religions to numb their thought, and that is alienation by the ruling class to the ruled class through religions.

In socialist society, we mainly discuss whether there exists religious alienation of people in socialist society where private ownership and alienated labor have been eliminated. Marx's ideal society is a place where there is no private ownership or alienated labor.

In a communist society, people do not have any particular range of activities, and they can develop in any sector. The society adjusts the whole production, thus making it possible for us to do whatever we are interested. We can hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, do animal husbandry in the evening and conduct criticism after dinner, so that we are not always a hunter, fisherman, shepherd or critic. (Ibid., p.165)

In such an ideal socialist society, there is no private ownership or alienated labor; without private ownership and alienated labor, there is no class. Without class, does it mean that there is not religious alienation of people? In such a society, the existence of religion is only people's belief. In belief, people get rid of real hardship and confusion, get the spiritual tranquility and realize self and life surpassing. However, if people are obsessed with a belief, the belief becomes a superstition. Once a belief becomes a superstition, it alienates the spiritual realm of people.

In a class society, the reason of religious alienation of people is largely due to class oppression. In a society where the exploiting class is in a dominant position, everything is turned upside down; for people who are under class oppression and who are unable to breathe with life burden, religion is like an air vent; for those who suffer disasters and poverty and lose confidence and hope for the life, religion is their spiritual comfort. In communist society where there is no class, religious alienation of people is mainly due to religious beliefs of people. Belief is a worship that we have over something, and this worship is entrusted with ideals and expectations we have something. Beliefs and superstitions are twin sisters. People have goals in beliefs first and then have to worship in beliefs. If people become obsessed with beliefs, then the belief becomes a superstition. Thus, there is religious alienation of people's thought. Whether in a class society or classless society, religious alienation of people mainly demonstrates in the following aspects:

First, through God worship, religion alienates human autonomy, making people lose the self-consciousness of their leader and dominator status in nature and society.

Marx believes that, men are free and conscious individuals of life activities. According to their own consciousness, men build society, nation and world in favor of human development. This is a fundamental human characteristic different from all other animals. Everything contrary to the fundamental attributes is inhumane.

Animals can only build in accordance with the scale and needs of the species they belong to, but men understand to produce in the scale of any species, and know how to apply the inner scale to the object, so people also build based on the rule of beauty. (Ibid., p.56)

However, people transfer the self-consciousness which people are essentially supposed to have to God, and God acts as the world's leader and dominator, and people become slaves dominated by the god. The creation story of god and the saying of god dominates everything are exactly the illustration of people losing their autonomy.

Second, through the concept of god, religion alienates the pursuit of value of human, making people lose their value attitude toward life and the meaning of lives. Marx believes that "it is not religion that created man, and it is man who created religion." (Ibid., p.1) In accordance with their value aspirations, human created god. People create illusory notion of God, with the aim that the ruling class utilizes the concept of god to paralyze the ruled class.

However, in religious concepts, gods are great and people are low. But people are created by gods. People's life and living are developed in accordance with God's will and requirements. People's life and living are the manifestation of the pursuit of God's value. Religion is distorted and alienates the value of human life and living. The meaning of life and living of God is the meaning of human life and living.

Third, religion alienates people's initiatives, making people lose the initiative power.

Marx believes that people get to know and transform the world and they have purposeful, planned and proactive activity capability. Initiative is a unique feature of human behavior. People can consciously consider problems and do things.

However, in religious concepts, God arranges everything for people, including people's living environment and life order. No one shall alter God's arrangement. People can only accept God's arrangement, obey God's command, experience God's greatness and amaze. Faced with difficulty and unreasonable and unfair phenomena in reality, people must learn to be patience and obedient. In this status in which people are acceptant and obedient, people lose their positive initiatives.

Fourth, religion alienates human creativity, making people lose the creativity to transform themselves and the world.

"Creation" is the process of a group of organic lives (creative people) to transform nature, society and the world. Marx believes that human nature is most characterized by the creative production activities, which constitute the purpose of life. "Individuals are how they show their personal life. Therefore, what they are is consistent with what they produce."¹ However, in religious concepts, God is the only dynamic subject of the world, and God is the creator of human, nature, society and the world' as well as the arranger of the order of the universe.

The existence of all things in the world is a manifestation of God's will and wisdom.

Therefore, Marx believes, to completely get rid of religion and to truly achieve human liberation, we need not only in conceptual form, but also in real form to completely end the enslaved and ruled state of people, abandon "the truth of the other side of the world", establish "the truth on this side of the world", and realize the emancipation and happiness of people in this life.

3. RELIGIOUS CRITIQUE AND HUMAN EMANCIPATION

The purpose of Marx's critique of religion is to criticize the "inverted world", that is the social reality of the "inverted world". Thus, Marx's religious critique is turned to critique of the secular world;

therefore, after the truth of the other side of the world disappears, the historical task is to establish the truth on this side of the world. After the sacred image of the self-alienation of people is exposed, to expose the self-alienation of a non-sacred image has become an urgent task of philosophy which serves history. Thus, the critique of the kingdom of heaven becomes the critique of the real world; the critique of religion becomes the critique of the law; the critique of theology becomes the critique of politics. (*Selected Works of Marx and Engels [Vol.1]*, 2012, p.2)

To abolish religion which brings the illusory happiness to people to achieve the liberation of human, we must criticize the secular world. To abolish religious fantastic happiness and find true happiness, we should uproot the social and living conditions which lead to religion from people's consciousness, and then it is possible to abolish religious fantasy. Marx believes that, only in this way can we be able to demise the entire religion, "establish the truth on this side of the world", and realize the real human emancipation. As Marx says, "to abolish religion which is the illusory happiness of people is to ask for real happiness of people. To require abandoning the illusion of people's situation is to require abandoning the situation which needs illusion; therefore, the critique of religion is the germ of the critique of secular sufferings - religion is their sacred aura." (Ibid., p.16)

Marx believes that only by focusing on the "practice" of "real people" can we have people get rid of the "illusory" sun of religion.

The critique tears those unreal flowers on the chain. It is not asking people to still wear the chain where there is no fantasy or consolation, but to get rid of it and pick fresh flowers. The critique of religion makes people reasonable people without illusions to think, to act and to create their own reality; so that they can rotate around the sun focusing on themselves and their own reality. Religion is the unreal sun. When people do not rotate around it, it always rotates around people. (Ibid., p.2)

Religion is the illusory sun and religion is the pursuit of those who cannot find their own life and their true life value and who lose confidence in relying on their

¹ The Editorial Department for *Marx-Leninism Research Data* in the CPC Central Committee Compilation and Translation Bureau for the Works of Marx, Engels and Lenin (1983. p.56). Beijing: People's Publishing House.

own efforts to change the unfortunate fate; it is also the spiritual realm of those who hope to get spiritual liberation and spiritual comfort from belief of god.

From Marx's view, to make people realize the true liberation and have people released from religion, there are mainly two aspects: On the one hand, we should strengthen the master position of people in the country and in the law. How can people become real men? How do people come out from religious fantasy? How do people become master of the country and the law? According to Marx's analysis of capitalist society, Marx points out that, labor under capitalist private ownership is an "alienation of labor". In the capitalist system, the creation of workers is separated from the creators. It is not only out of human control, and, in turn, it becomes the alien force to enslave and dominate human and oppose human. Therefore, to make people become the masters of the country and the law, we must eliminate the alienation of labor and private ownership. Whatever the social form is, as long as there is alienated labor and private ownership, there will exist labor alienation of human. To eliminate alienation of labor and private ownership is the only way to have people in reality become the masters of the country and law and it is also the only way to uproot religion from people's consciousness.

This material and direct sensuous private property is the material and emotional manifestation of alienated human life. The movement of private property - production and consumption - is by far the emotional manifestation of all production movement, that is, the realization of human or human reality. Religion, family, country, law, ethics, science, art, etc., are just some of the special ways of production, and are dominated by the universal law of production. Therefore, the positive transcendence of private property, as possession of human life, is positive transcendence of all alienations, which is a return of people from religion, family, country, etc. to their humane existence that is social existence. (Ibid., p.186)

On the other hand, we should strengthen the independence of people's thinking. Religion requires people to have devout faith in God, stressing that "it works when you are faithful". However, some people are obsessed with religious beliefs and cannot extricate themselves. They do not try or do things, nor through their own efforts or the help of others to solve their problems. They think that as long as they beg God and as long as they devoutly beg God's help, God will fulfill their expectations. The more people pray to God to help, they will lose more independence in thinking, and thus they will be

more obsessed with superstition and cannot extricate themselves.

In this life, people should insist on independent thinking. Everything has to go through people's own mind and to be judged by people, and we should pursue firm progressive beliefs. Society needs the truth, and "God is really the God of people," but sometimes, people just need untrue words and lies, despite knowing that they are false, yet they are still willing to believe them. It is just because people need spiritual solace when they are helpless. Religion plays a vital role in the development process of history. Belief has positive energy. With a belief in your heart, you will be able to transform yourself in the process to adapt to society. With a belief in your heart, you will have a pioneering spirit. Therefore, we advocate having a firm progressive rather than a blindly nor superstitious belief.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, religion is to explain the existence of the universe and is a cultural phenomenon of having faith in and worship gods. It should be said that, certain virtues and values that religion advocates are somewhat beneficial; to have people in awe and to maintain an appropriate humility is not without benefits; and people can indeed seek spiritual solace and tranquility from religion ...because of these reasons, religion has a long history and it has many believers in the world. In the eyes of the believers, "God" or "deity" is the highest and the last refuge of human as well as the highest and last human spiritual home. It is the "anchor" with which people can moor. People can find the final consolation when they have the "anchor" to moor. However, Marx reserves the "inverted world consciousness" and believes that "it is man who created religion and it is not religious that created man." He uses "practice" as a link, set up a bridge of "practice" between man and nature and man and society, refutes the "anchor" with which believers moor, let believers come out from the "anchor" and enter the real society to continue to fight for the realization of people's liberation and the happiness of their own.

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