

## Religion as Alienation: A Critical Analysis of Karl Marx's Thought in the Perspective of Religious Studies

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### Abstract

Religion has long been examined not only as a theological belief system but also as a social phenomenon shaped by historical, economic, and political structures. One of the most influential critical perspectives in this field was developed by Karl Marx, who interpreted religion as a form of alienation arising from exploitative social conditions. This study aims to analyze Karl Marx's concept of religion as alienation and evaluate its relevance for contemporary religious studies. The research employs a qualitative library research method based on conceptual and theoretical analysis. Primary data are derived from Marx's major works, including *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, and *Capital*, while secondary sources consist of scholarly literature in sociology of religion. Data were collected through systematic document analysis and interpreted using a critical sociological approach. The findings show that Marx viewed religion as both an expression of human suffering and an ideological mechanism that obscures structural injustice within capitalist societies. Comparative analysis with the perspectives of Feuerbach, Durkheim, and Weber reveals that religion cannot be explained solely through economic factors but must be understood as a multidimensional phenomenon involving ideology, social integration, and cultural meaning. This study concludes that Marx's theory remains relevant as a critical analytical framework for examining the relationship between religion, ideology, and power in modern societies.

**Keywords : Alienation, Ideology, Karl Marx, Religion, Religious Studies**

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## 1. Introduction

The study of religion in modern social sciences has undergone significant transformation over the past two centuries. Religion is no longer interpreted solely as a theological system concerned with metaphysical beliefs and divine revelation. Instead, it is increasingly understood as a complex social phenomenon that interacts with historical, economic, and political structures within society. This shift marks an important methodological development in religious studies, moving from normative and theological approaches toward critical and interdisciplinary perspectives that analyze religion in relation to power, ideology, and social conditions (Turner, 2011). From this perspective, religion is not simply a matter of individual faith but also a cultural and social institution that shapes and is shaped by the dynamics of society.

Within the development of modern social theory, Karl Marx occupies a central position as one of the most influential thinkers who offered a radical critique of religion. Marx's critique cannot be separated from his broader intellectual project, namely the critique of capitalism and the struggle for human emancipation from structural domination. For Marx, religion is not an autonomous spiritual reality but rather a social phenomenon emerging from unequal economic relations and exploitative social structures. Religion reflects the material conditions of society and functions as part of the ideological superstructure that maintains and legitimizes existing relations of power (McLellan, 1973). Through this perspective, Marx fundamentally transformed the way religion is analyzed within the social sciences.

Marx's critique of religion is most famously expressed in his statement that religion is "the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions," concluding that it is "the opium of the people" (Marx, 1844). This statement is often interpreted simplistically as a complete rejection of religion. However, a deeper reading reveals a more nuanced and ambivalent perspective. Marx does not deny the emotional and existential significance of religion for human beings. Rather, he argues that religion emerges as a response to real suffering and social injustice. Religion expresses the pain and alienation experienced by individuals living under oppressive social conditions. At the same time, however, religion also functions as a mechanism that alleviates this suffering symbolically while leaving the structural causes of oppression untouched (Fromm, 1961).

The concept of alienation is therefore central to understanding Marx's interpretation of religion. Alienation refers to a condition in which human beings become estranged from their own essence, their labor, their social relations, and the products of their work. In capitalist societies, according to Marx, workers lose control over the products they create, the process of production, and ultimately their own human potential. As a result, individuals experience a deep sense of disconnection from themselves and from the social world around them. Within this context, religion emerges as a symbolic response that offers meaning, consolation, and hope in the face of existential deprivation (Marx, 1844).

Marx's interpretation of religion represents a significant methodological shift in the study of religion. Instead of analyzing religion primarily through its doctrines, rituals, or spiritual experiences, Marx situates religion within the broader framework of economic and social relations. Religion is understood as part of the ideological superstructure that reflects and reproduces the material base of society. This perspective opened the way for the development of critical approaches in religious studies, particularly within sociology, philosophy, and political economy (Turner, 2011). Through this framework, religion can be analyzed as a social construct shaped by historical conditions and power relations.

Despite its influential role in social theory, Marx's approach to religion has been widely debated within contemporary religious studies. Several scholars argue that Marx's interpretation tends to reduce religion to economic and ideological factors, neglecting the symbolic, cultural, and experiential dimensions of religious life. Durkheim, for example, interpreted religion not as a form of illusion but as a social institution that plays a crucial role in maintaining social cohesion and collective solidarity (Durkheim, 1912). In Durkheim's perspective, religious rituals and symbols function as mechanisms that reinforce collective identity and moral order within society.

Similarly, Max Weber offered a different interpretation of the relationship between religion and society. Weber argued that religious ideas can actively shape social and economic behavior rather than merely reflecting material conditions. In his analysis of the Protestant ethic, Weber demonstrated how religious beliefs contributed to the development of capitalist rationality and modern economic practices (Weber, 2001). From Weber's perspective, religion is not simply an ideological tool that maintains social domination but also a source of meaning, motivation, and social transformation.

The contrast between Marx, Durkheim, and Weber illustrates the diversity of theoretical perspectives within the sociology of religion. While Marx emphasizes the ideological and material dimensions of religion, Durkheim highlights its integrative social function, and Weber focuses on its interpretive and motivational role in shaping social action (Hamilton, 2001). These different approaches demonstrate that religion cannot be fully understood through a single theoretical framework. Instead, religion must be analyzed as a multidimensional phenomenon that operates simultaneously at the levels of ideology, culture, and social structure.

In contemporary society, the relevance of Marx's critique of religion remains a subject of ongoing debate. On the one hand, globalization, technological development, and economic transformation have reshaped the role of religion in public life. On the other hand, religion continues to play a significant role in political mobilization, identity formation, and social conflict. In many contexts, religious symbols and narratives are employed to legitimize political authority, justify social hierarchies, or mobilize collective support. These phenomena raise important questions about the relationship between religion, ideology, and power in modern societies (Giddens, 1991).

At the same time, the commercialization of religious symbols and practices in contemporary capitalist societies presents new forms of alienation that resonate with Marx's analysis. Religious identities and symbols are increasingly commodified through media industries, tourism, consumer culture, and digital platforms. In this context, religion is not only a system of belief but also a cultural commodity circulating within global markets. Such developments suggest that Marx's analysis of ideology and alienation may still offer valuable insights for understanding the transformation of religion in modern capitalist societies (Eagleton, 2007).

Despite the continuing relevance of Marx's critique, many studies of religion have focused primarily on theological interpretations or sociological descriptions without fully engaging with the critical implications of Marx's theory of alienation. As a result, there remains a significant gap in the literature concerning the systematic analysis of Marx's concept of religion as alienation within the broader framework of contemporary religious studies. Existing research often treats Marx's critique as either a purely philosophical argument or a historical artifact of nineteenth-century thought, without adequately exploring its methodological contribution to the interdisciplinary study of religion (Wolff, 2002).

This study seeks to address this gap by providing a critical analysis of Karl Marx's concept of religion as alienation within the context of modern religious studies. Unlike many previous studies that focus primarily on Marx's political or economic theories, this research examines how Marx's critique of religion contributes to methodological debates in the study of religion. The novelty of this study lies in its attempt to integrate Marx's theory of alienation with broader sociological perspectives on religion, particularly those developed by Durkheim and Weber, in order to provide a more comprehensive understanding of religion as a social and ideological phenomenon.

Based on this perspective, the main objective of this study is to critically analyze Karl Marx's concept of religion as alienation and to examine its relevance for contemporary religious studies, particularly in understanding the relationship between religion, ideology, and social power in modern societies.

## 2. Method

This study employs a qualitative research design based on a library research approach to critically examine Karl Marx's concept of religion as alienation and its relevance in contemporary religious studies. The research focuses on conceptual and theoretical analysis rather than empirical field data, as the main object of the study is the philosophical and sociological thought of Karl Marx concerning religion. The primary data sources consist of Marx's original works, particularly Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844, Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right, and Capital, which contain Marx's central ideas on alienation, ideology, and the social function of religion. In addition, secondary sources are collected from scholarly books and academic literature discussing Marx's thought and the sociology of religion, including works by Ludwig Feuerbach, Émile Durkheim, and Max Weber. The data collection technique is conducted through systematic document analysis, where relevant texts, theories, and interpretations related to Marx's theory of alienation and religion are identified, selected, and classified according to the research objectives.

The data analysis in this study uses a qualitative interpretative approach combined with conceptual analysis. The analysis begins with a critical reading of Marx's original texts to identify the philosophical foundations of the concept of alienation and its relation to religion as a social phenomenon. Subsequently, the identified concepts are interpreted within the broader framework of social theory and religious studies to explore their theoretical implications. Comparative analysis is also applied to examine the similarities and differences between Marx's perspective and other classical theories of religion proposed by Feuerbach, Durkheim, and Weber. Through this analytical process, the study aims to reconstruct Marx's critique of religion and evaluate its relevance in understanding the relationship between religion, ideology, and social structures in contemporary societies. The findings are then interpreted using a critical sociological perspective in order to highlight the contribution of Marx's theory to the methodological development of interdisciplinary religious studies.

## 3. Results and Discussion

To understand the concept of religion as alienation in Karl Marx's thought and its position within the broader field of religious studies, this research conducts a comparative conceptual analysis of several classical theories of religion. The analysis focuses on Marx's interpretation of religion as a form of alienation and ideological expression of social inequality, and compares it with the perspectives of Ludwig Feuerbach, Émile Durkheim, and Max Weber. These thinkers represent different theoretical traditions in the study of religion, ranging from philosophical anthropology to sociological and interpretive approaches. Through this comparison, the study aims to identify the distinctive characteristics of Marx's theory as well as its relevance and limitations in contemporary religious studies. The results of this comparative analysis are summarized in the following table.

Table 1 Comparison of Classical Theories of Religion in Religious Studies

Thinker	Main Perspective on Religion	Key Concept	Social Function of Religion	Relation to the Concept of Alienation
<b>Karl Marx</b>	Religion is a product of material conditions and social inequality	Alienation and ideology	Legitimizes social domination and masks structural injustice	Religion reflects human alienation caused by exploitative economic structures
<b>Ludwig Feuerbach</b>	Religion is a projection of human essence	Anthropological projection	Expresses human ideals and aspirations	Alienation occurs when humans

	onto a divine being			attribute their own qualities to God
<b>Émile Durkheim</b>	Religion is a social institution that reinforces collective solidarity	Collective consciousness	Maintains moral order and social cohesion	Alienation is not central; religion functions as a unifying force
<b>Max Weber</b>	Religion shapes social action and economic behavior	Religious ethics and rationalization	Provides meaning and motivation for social action	Religion can influence social transformation rather than merely reflect alienation

The table shows that Karl Marx interprets religion primarily as a reflection of social inequality and human alienation produced by exploitative economic structures. In Marx's view, religion functions as an ideological mechanism that provides symbolic comfort while simultaneously obscuring the structural roots of social injustice. Compared to Feuerbach, Marx develops a broader analysis by linking religious alienation not only to human projection but also to historical and material conditions within society. In contrast, Durkheim emphasizes the integrative role of religion in maintaining social cohesion and collective consciousness, while Weber highlights the capacity of religious ideas to shape social action and historical change. These differences indicate that religion cannot be explained solely through a single theoretical perspective; instead, it must be understood as a multidimensional phenomenon involving ideological, social, and cultural dimensions within human society.

## Discussion

Karl Marx's interpretation of religion as alienation represents one of the most influential critical perspectives in the social scientific study of religion. Marx does not approach religion as a purely theological phenomenon or as an autonomous spiritual reality detached from social conditions. Instead, he situates religion within the broader framework of socio-economic relations that shape human consciousness and social organization. According to Marx, religion emerges from concrete historical conditions characterized by inequality, exploitation, and structural domination. In this context, religion functions as both an expression of human suffering and a mechanism that symbolically alleviates that suffering without addressing its structural causes. Marx famously described religion as "the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions," concluding that religion is "the opium of the people." This statement reflects a critical yet ambivalent view of religion: while religion expresses genuine human suffering, it simultaneously functions as an ideological instrument that pacifies the oppressed and stabilizes unjust social arrangements (Marx, 1844; Fromm, n.d.).

The concept of alienation plays a central role in Marx's interpretation of religion. Alienation refers to the condition in which individuals become estranged from the products of their labor, the process of production, their fellow human beings, and their own human essence. In capitalist societies, workers produce commodities that they do not own and that confront them as external forces. The labor process itself becomes a mechanical and coerced activity rather than a creative expression of human potential. As a result, individuals lose control over their material existence and experience a profound sense of disconnection from their own humanity. Within such conditions, religion emerges as a symbolic response that provides meaning and consolation. By projecting ideals of justice, harmony, and fulfillment into a transcendent realm, religion offers an imagined resolution to the contradictions of real social life. However, according to Marx, this symbolic resolution ultimately reinforces alienation

because it diverts attention away from the structural conditions that produce human suffering (Marx, 1844; Wolff, 2002).

Marx therefore argues that religion should be understood as a form of inverted consciousness. Human beings create religious ideas, yet these ideas appear to possess independent authority over their creators. This inversion occurs because the social world produced by human labor becomes alienated from the individuals who created it. Economic systems, political institutions, and ideological structures appear as objective realities beyond human control. Religion becomes one of the most powerful forms of this inverted consciousness because it transforms human ideals into transcendent powers. The divine becomes the embodiment of values that human beings are unable to realize within their social conditions. Consequently, religious belief reflects the alienated nature of social relations rather than an independent metaphysical reality. Marx insists that the critique of religion must therefore be connected to the critique of society itself. Without transforming the social conditions that generate alienation, religious consciousness will continue to reproduce itself as a response to human suffering (Marx, 1844; Eagleton, n.d.).

The ideological function of religion further explains why religion plays a stabilizing role within unequal social systems. In Marx's theory, ideology refers to systems of ideas that obscure the real nature of social relations and legitimize the interests of dominant classes. Religion can operate as an ideological mechanism by providing moral and symbolic justification for existing social hierarchies. Religious narratives about divine will, destiny, and rewards in the afterlife may encourage individuals to accept suffering in the present rather than challenge unjust social structures. Through such narratives, religion contributes to the maintenance of social order by discouraging critical awareness of economic exploitation and political domination. In this sense, religion does not create oppression directly but functions as a cultural framework that normalizes and legitimizes inequality (Marx & Engels, n.d.; Eagleton, 2009).

However, Marx does not portray religion as a deliberate conspiracy designed by ruling elites to manipulate the masses. Instead, religion emerges organically from real social experiences of insecurity, suffering, and alienation. Because religion expresses genuine human needs for meaning and consolation, it becomes a powerful ideological system that resonates deeply with human consciousness. The effectiveness of religion as ideology lies precisely in this ambivalence: it expresses authentic human emotions while simultaneously obscuring the structural conditions that produce those emotions. This dual character explains why religion has persisted throughout history and continues to play an important role in modern societies despite processes of secularization and modernization (Fromm, n.d.; Eagleton, 2009).

Marx's critique of religion was strongly influenced by Ludwig Feuerbach's anthropological interpretation of religion. In *The Essence of Christianity*, Feuerbach argued that religion is essentially a projection of human essence onto the idea of God. According to Feuerbach, attributes such as wisdom, love, and omnipotence that believers attribute to God are actually idealized human qualities. By projecting these qualities onto a divine being, human beings alienate themselves from their own potential. Feuerbach therefore viewed religion as a form of anthropological alienation in which humans externalize their own essence and then become subordinate to it. Marx accepted Feuerbach's basic insight that religion reflects human alienation, but he criticized Feuerbach for limiting his analysis to the level of consciousness and philosophical reflection. For Marx, religious alienation cannot be explained solely through psychological or anthropological categories; it must be analyzed within the context of concrete historical and economic conditions (Feuerbach, n.d.; McLellan, n.d.).

By shifting the analysis from philosophical anthropology to socio-economic structures, Marx developed a more historically grounded critique of religion. While Feuerbach emphasized the psychological projection of human qualities, Marx argued that such projections arise from material conditions of social inequality and exploitation. Religious alienation therefore reflects deeper forms of alienation embedded in capitalist modes of production. Marx famously stated in his *Theses on Feuerbach* that the essence of human beings is not an abstract quality inherent in individuals but the totality of social relations. This statement highlights the

fundamental difference between Marx and Feuerbach. Whereas Feuerbach proposed overcoming religious alienation through philosophical enlightenment, Marx insisted that genuine emancipation requires transforming the social conditions that produce alienation in the first place (Marx, n.d.; McLellan, n.d.).

A different interpretation of religion can be found in the sociological theory of Émile Durkheim. Unlike Marx, Durkheim did not view religion primarily as an illusion or ideological instrument. Instead, he regarded religion as a fundamental social institution that plays a crucial role in maintaining social cohesion and collective identity. In *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, Durkheim defined religion as a unified system of beliefs and practices related to sacred things that unite individuals into a moral community. According to Durkheim, religious symbols and rituals function as expressions of collective consciousness that bind individuals together in shared moral commitments. From this perspective, religion performs a positive integrative function by reinforcing social solidarity and moral order within society (Durkheim, n.d.; Hamilton, 2001).

The contrast between Marx and Durkheim reflects two different approaches to understanding religion as a social phenomenon. Marx emphasizes the role of conflict, domination, and economic inequality in shaping religious consciousness. Durkheim, on the other hand, highlights the integrative functions of religion in sustaining social order and collective identity. Despite these differences, both thinkers share an important methodological insight: religion must be understood as a social phenomenon embedded within the structures of society rather than as a purely individual or theological experience. Their theories therefore represent complementary perspectives within the sociology of religion, one focusing on conflict and ideology and the other emphasizing integration and social solidarity (Turner, 2011).

Max Weber provides yet another perspective that further complicates Marx's interpretation of religion. Weber's approach differs fundamentally from Marx's economic determinism by emphasizing the interpretive dimension of social action. In Weber's view, religious ideas can actively shape social behavior and historical development rather than merely reflecting underlying economic conditions. Weber's famous study *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* illustrates this argument by demonstrating how Protestant religious beliefs contributed to the development of capitalist economic rationality. According to Weber, Calvinist doctrines about predestination and vocational calling encouraged believers to pursue disciplined work and economic success as signs of divine favor. These religious values played an important role in shaping the cultural foundations of modern capitalism (Weber, 2001; Giddens, n.d.).

Weber's analysis challenges Marx's assumption that economic structures determine religious consciousness. Instead, Weber proposes a multidimensional relationship between religion and social life in which ideas, values, and cultural meanings can influence economic behavior and institutional development. Religion thus possesses a relative autonomy within social life and can function as a source of social transformation rather than merely an ideological reflection of economic relations. Weber also emphasized the broader process of rationalization that characterizes modern societies. As modern institutions become increasingly bureaucratic and rationalized, traditional religious worldviews gradually lose their authority. Weber described this process as the "disenchantment of the world," a condition in which modern societies become dominated by rational calculation rather than sacred meaning (Weber, 2001).

The comparison between Marx, Durkheim, and Weber demonstrates that religion cannot be fully explained through a single theoretical framework. Marx reveals the ideological and political dimensions of religion by highlighting its relationship with economic inequality and power structures. Durkheim emphasizes the integrative and moral functions of religion in maintaining social cohesion. Weber, meanwhile, highlights the interpretive and cultural dimensions of religion that shape human motivation and social action. Together, these perspectives provide a multidimensional framework for understanding religion as a phenomenon that simultaneously involves ideology, social integration, and cultural meaning (Turner, 2011).

In contemporary religious studies, Marx's theory remains highly relevant for analyzing the relationship between religion, ideology, and power. In many societies, religious symbols and narratives continue to play an important role in political mobilization, economic interests, and identity formation. Religious discourse is often used to legitimize political authority, justify social hierarchies, or mobilize collective support in conflicts over resources and power. From a Marxian perspective, such phenomena illustrate how religion can function as an ideological framework that shapes social consciousness and reinforces existing power structures. At the same time, the persistence of religion in modern societies suggests that religion also fulfills important existential and cultural needs that cannot be reduced solely to economic interests (Berger, n.d.; Turner, 2011).

Therefore, while Marx's critique of religion may appear reductionist in emphasizing economic factors, it remains an essential analytical tool for uncovering the ideological dimensions of religious life. When integrated with the functional insights of Durkheim and the interpretive approach of Weber, Marx's theory contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of religion as a complex social phenomenon. Such an interdisciplinary perspective allows scholars to analyze religion not only as a system of belief but also as a field of power relations, cultural meanings, and social practices that shape the dynamics of contemporary societies.

#### 4. Conclusions and Suggestions

This study demonstrates that Karl Marx's concept of religion as alienation provides a critical framework for understanding the relationship between religion, ideology, and social structures. In Marx's perspective, religion is not merely a spiritual belief system but a social phenomenon that emerges from conditions of economic inequality and structural domination. Religion functions as both an expression of human suffering and an ideological mechanism that symbolically alleviates that suffering while simultaneously preserving the social conditions that produce it. Through the concept of alienation, Marx explains how individuals living under capitalist relations of production become estranged from their labor, social relations, and human essence, leading them to project their hopes and ideals into religious belief. Although Marx's theory tends to emphasize material conditions and has been criticized for its reductionist tendencies, his analysis remains significant for revealing the ideological dimensions of religion and its connection to relations of power within society. When compared with the perspectives of Feuerbach, Durkheim, and Weber, Marx's theory contributes an important critical dimension to the sociology of religion, particularly in uncovering how religious discourse can function within broader structures of domination and inequality.

Based on these findings, this study suggests that contemporary religious studies should not rely on a single theoretical framework but should adopt an integrative and interdisciplinary approach. Marx's critical perspective is particularly useful for analyzing the ideological and political uses of religion in modern societies, including the politicization of religious symbols, the commodification of religious practices, and the relationship between religion and social inequality. However, to achieve a more comprehensive understanding of religion, Marx's analysis should be complemented by other sociological perspectives, such as Durkheim's emphasis on social integration and Weber's focus on the interpretive and motivational dimensions of religious action. Future research is therefore encouraged to explore the interaction between religion, economic structures, cultural meanings, and political power in contemporary contexts, particularly in plural and democratic societies where religion continues to play an important role in shaping social identities and public discourse..

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