

# THE CONCEPT OF RELIGION ACCORDING TO KARL MARX AND FRIEDRICH ENGELS

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### 1.3. ACORDING TO KARL MARX and FRIEDRICH ENGELS

Marxists regard religion as ideological. They define it as a product of the ideology of the ruling class, which, by promising an illusory freedom in the afterlife instead of a real freedom in this world, serves to counterbalance the revolutionary potential of people under various social oppressions and to normalize and justify their own domination. No one can deny that religion serves this function, but it is hardly possible to say that this is the reason for its existence. As a matter of fact, Marx, while agreeing with the above well-known Marxist definition, points out that this is not the way religion is formed, that it is a result. In fact, he did not systematically engage with the subject of religion. According to him, consciousness is a product of society and the religious world is nothing but a reflection of the real world. In other words, man constructs religion, not religion constructs man; like Freud, he says that all religions are a fantastic reflection in the human brain of the forces that control people's daily lives. *“Religion is the heart of a heartless world.” He argues that people seek refuge in religion to find peace in this cruel world. He concludes that religion is the opium of the people, legitimizing the domination of a certain class and teaching people to be docile and obedient to their masters, as Marxists have argued. He says that religion prevents people from challenging the injustices of this world by creating an imaginary other world.*<sup>1</sup> But this is all about the end result of religion, we can say that Marx differed from the Marxists on the formation of religion when he said: *“Religion is the sigh of oppressed creatures, the heart of a heartless world, the soul of soulless events. (Religion) is the opium of the people.”*<sup>2</sup> The opium mentioned in the sentence is not a tool used by an unscrupulous upper class to lull the people to sleep, as Marxists understand it, but a self-deception that people use to keep themselves from sinking beneath the surface of events. In other words, Marx saw religion as a tool used by the mass of people to console or numb themselves against the cruelties of life, against the fact that the upper class was oppressing the proletariat. He emphasized that this was the case in all history with historical materialism. According to Marx, the moment man understands the deception in religion, he also understands the necessity of eliminating the conditions under which he enslaves himself. He stated that the only way to understand this deception is through revolution, with the words *“social existence determines consciousness”*.<sup>3</sup> Marx and Feuerbach have similar ideas about human self-deception and the possibility of getting rid of it once one realizes it.

In the final analysis, Marxists see religion as a drug that numbs the emotions and makes them impervious to pain. They say that God does not create human beings in his own image, but that human beings create gods in their own image and likeness, and they use Feuerbach's words as evidence: *“if birds had a religion, their gods would have wings”*. They also claim that religion has created classes since the beginning of history and explain it as follows: Citing the Babylonian god Marduk, they argue that the gods created humans to serve them, i.e. to

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<sup>1</sup> Bozkurt, *a.g.e.*, s.245.

<sup>2</sup> Mardin, *a.g.e.*, s.42.

<sup>3</sup> Fulya Saatçioğlu ve Murat Ukray, *Das Kapital & Karl Marx*, Ankara 2014, s.203.

perform temple rituals or menial tasks, to provide food for the gods, and so on. They point out that this divides humanity into two classes, with the untouchable gods constituting the ruling class and those who serve constituting the laboring class. In this way, the clergy were freed from the necessity to work and had full services and privileges as the physical representatives of the gods on earth. They emphasize that the purpose of religion is to provide ideological justification for the enslavement of the majority to the minority, even though this is the reality of ancient and modern society. Marxists say that all the religions that existed in the world were communist in the beginning, and that the prophets and the first ones who followed them were communists. In drawing this conclusion, they evaluate the early periods and look at what was done, and they are completely right. All of the newly emerging religions, divine or secular, supported the oppressed, the poor, the hungry and grew and expanded with their followers. What these pioneers did and said almost exactly coincides with communist principles and rhetoric. We can reinforce the reality of this by quoting some examples from Christianity:

*"The use of all the things in this world should be common to all people. The greatest evil is when one person says to others - this is mine, that is yours - and this is the root of the quarrels between people." Aziz Clement (death: 101 A.D.)*

*"What things do you call 'mine'? What things can you call 'mine'? From whom did you take them? You talk and behave like someone who, on one occasion or another, goes early to the theater and, without hindrance, seizes the seats reserved for the rest of the people, claims that they didn't arrive on time, and prevents them from sitting down, claiming that in reality the common property is only for his own use. And this is exactly how the rich behave." Aziz Basil (death: 379 A.D.)*

*"The earth is the common property of all those born on it and therefore all the products of the earth belong to everyone without distinction." Aziz Gregory (death: 604 A.D.)*

*"Nature has made its riches available for the common use of all people. God created everything generously so that all living beings could enjoy it in common and the world would be their common property. While it is only unjust usurpation that creates the right to private property, it is nature itself that gives birth to the right to community." Aziz Ambrose (death: 397 A.D.)*

These words were spoken in the early days of Christianity, and they emphasize, as the communists do, that the basis of the class struggle is the right to private property. Therefore, this is the reason for all the fights. However, the early believers of Christianity, whom Marxists consider to be communists, changed under the hegemony of the ruling class in later years and sided with the power and fought against the oppressed. The first believing communists of Christianity were replaced by those who took money from believers in exchange for the forgiveness of their sins, sold places to believers in the afterlife and so on. The church and religion are no longer on the side of the oppressed, but have infiltrated the state power, which

is the oppressor. This situation is not unique to Christianity; a careful examination of the historical course of all other religions can easily show that this is also the case.

F. Engels said that “as far as the state is concerned, religion is a purely personal question”. Commenting on this statement, Lenin said: “the state should not be concerned with religion; religious institutions should not depend on the state. Everyone should be free to profess whatever religion he likes or to declare himself an atheist, that is to say, an atheist like every socialist in general”. Lenin, however, says: “The party of the proletariat wants the state to declare that religion is a personal problem, but it does not consider the struggle against the opium of the people, against religious superstitions, etc., a personal problem. The opportunists distort the question as if the Social Democratic Party regarded religion as a personal question.”<sup>4</sup> While Lenin says that everyone should be free to believe in religion and that the state should ensure this, he also states that the state should fight against this opium. On the one hand, he emphasizes that one should be libertarian and leave this issue to the freedom of individuals, and on the other hand, he says that the state must fight it. The same idea is present in all Marxist-Leninists, they emphasize the freedom of people with regard to religion, but on the other hand they fight against the individual to make him give up his religion and they feel obliged to fight against it.

Marxists say that moral teachings such as love thy neighbor, help others, etc., which are inculcated by both celestial religions and moral religions, are not possible in class societies; the market economy, which is accompanied by an ethic of cut-throat competition, which drives my neighbor into poverty, etc., and the capitalistized human consciousness and morality turn such moral inculcations into a difficult or even impossible proposition. In order to change people's psychology and behavior, it is necessary to change their way of life. This situation is one of alienation; what is called alienation consists of this: dead things (capital) are seen as alive, while living things (human beings, labor) are considered dead, insignificant, meaningless. Marx's self-deception in religion is also an alienation; the proletariat is the class where this alienation takes place, not only in the religious plan, but also in the social, economic and political plans. Therefore, the proletariat, where alienation is superimposed in various ways, is the group that will realize the revolution. According to Marx, there is a strong link between ideology and religion, and the characteristic of religion, according to him, is that it is not an instrument of domination, but a means of rescue that people cling to. Marx's thoughts and explanation of religion is that religion is one of the learned intellectual patterns that ensure the continuation of the mechanisms of a given society. The ideological character of religion shows itself at this point. In fact, the opiate function of religion is no different from the opiate function of any other system. Given that all culture, no matter under which system, has a self-perpetuating quality, all of its elements are ideological in nature. Ideology is not a private deception, as Marx inferred, but becomes the rules of the game that society plays on all its members in different fields in order to perpetuate itself.

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<sup>4</sup>See *place*, s.194-195.