Journal of Dharma 50, 1 (January–March 2025), 97–108

Marxist View on Religion: An Auxiliary Approach to Power and Just Society

Youliang Chen♦

Abstract: This article explores Karl Marx's view on religion through the framework of his developmental philosophy, situating it within the cultural and ideological landscape of Western Europe, where institutional Christianity exerted deep social influence. It contends that Marx's critique targeted distorted and complicit forms of religion that, in his view, reinforced unjust power structures. Adopting an auxiliary approach, the study neither dismisses religion wholesale nor embraces it uncritically, but considers its potential as a resource for praxis and social transformation. The discussion traces Marx's methodological transition from Hegelian idealism to a materialist, practice-oriented analysis, shaped by the political and economic realities of his era. Comparative reflections on Chinese ethical traditions and the broader discourse on alienation reveal how religious and secular currents can converge in the pursuit of justice. The paper concludes that Marx's social analysis remains a vital instrument for exposing concentrations of power and forging pathways toward equity and a just society.

Keywords: *Christianity, Hegel, Marx, Philosophy, Power, Religion, Sociology*.

1. Introduction

No doubt, Marxism as an ideological theory still remains a powerful tool for critiquing injustice within capitalist societies, particularly in its analysis of global class struggles. One of the most iconic statements from *The Communist Manifesto* captures

---

♦**Youliang Chen** is from School of Marxism, Zhumadian Preschool Education College, Zhumadian 463000, China
Email: chenyouliangbz@163.com.

© 2025 Journal of Dharma: Dharmaram Journal of Religions and Philosophies (DVK, Bangalore), ISSN: 0253-7222

this essence: "The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles" (Marx and Engels, 14). Numerous studies have employed Marx's theoretical insights across cultural, religious and sociological domains, contributing significantly to the upliftment of marginalized communities. In particular, the emergence of various scholarly works grounded in Marx's methodology has addressed the dynamics of class exploitation from nineteenth- and twentieth-century capitalist perspectives. On one hand, Marx's theoretical framework functions as a potent instrument for social analysis (Aman, 427). On the other, his staunch opposition to religion must be interpreted within its specific historical and geographical context (Blunden, 8). From a sociological standpoint, Marx's critique of exploitation emerged in a society where capitalist elites dominated labor markets, reducing workers to near-slavery in pursuit of profit. Understanding the conditions that shaped Marx's antagonism toward religion—especially the dominant form of Christianity of his time—is crucial for evaluating his position on religion.

Marx's rejection of religion, particularly Christianity, stemmed from what he perceived as a distortion of its original teachings, which had become complicit in maintaining unjust social orders. Yet, many contemporary Marxist interpretations often overlook the historical and religious context that shaped Marx's critique. For example, Michael Burawoy (1978) argues that Marxists tend to project a future-oriented teleology onto Marx's thought, presuming a historical inevitability in his vision. However, such deterministic readings risk oversimplifying the nature of history. As Burawoy reminds us, history does not function as a fortune-teller; it offers alternatives but does not guarantee outcomes (61). Philosophically, history functions as an investigative tool. According to Anthony Jensen (2024), historical events provide a fertile ground for philosophical inquiry, generating diverse methodological approaches (233). This means that engaging with historical realities—whether Marxist, religious, or otherwise—requires a nuanced understanding that moves beyond simplistic binaries of past and present.

This principle also finds resonance in Chinese intellectual

traditions. The teachings of Confucianism and Taoism demonstrate how new insights are often generated through reinterpretation rather than outright rejection of the past. This adaptive spirit stands in contrast to certain strands of Christianity, particularly post-Constantine, which departed from early Christian values such as feeding the hungry and caring for the marginalized (Hakim, 9). This raises a critical question: Can religious doctrines and historical realities be validated only within their original contexts, or do they retain relevance for contemporary and future societies? Indian theologian and philosopher S. Kappen (1977) argues that Marx's critique of religion was shaped by the prevailing distortions of Christianity in his time, not necessarily by the core tenets of the Christian tradition (53–54). Thus, Marx's opposition was not a wholesale rejection of religion, but a response to its institutional manifestations that perpetuated inequality.

Bringing Marx and Christianity into conversation does not imply that historical doctrines are forever confined to their original contexts. Rather, it reveals that Marx's critique targeted the corrupted version of Christianity prevalent in his day, while leaving room for recovering its ethical and liberative dimensions. The purpose of this paper is threefold. First, it examines the development of Marx's view of religion in relation to his specific historical and cultural context. Second, it explores how Marx's philosophical and sociological critiques, influenced by thinkers like Hegel, contributed to his vision of a just society. Finally, it investigates the methodological evolution in Marx's thought and proposes an auxiliary approach to religion—neither dogmatic nor dismissive—as a constructive pathway toward global justice.

2. Philosophical and Sociological Approach

Karl Marx's philosophy and sociology present a penetrating critique of the structures that perpetuate inequality and oppression, offering a framework that connects economic, political and religious systems to the pursuit of a just society. Marx's analysis remains significant because it moves beyond abstract theory, seeking practical transformation. Marx's

engagement with Hegelian philosophy shaped his early intellectual development, but he diverged from Hegel's idealism in favour of materialist analysis. Hegel's abstract conception of the state, detached from socio-political realities, did not address the systemic exploitation of the time. Marx instead emphasized concrete social conditions and practical implications, resonating more with Aristotle's grounded, pragmatic approach. His critical journey involved three phases: critique of Hegel's philosophy, critique of the Left Hegelians and the adoption of Feuerbach's materialism. While retaining Hegel's dialectical method, Marx transformed it into a tool for examining the real power dynamics between social classes.

At the core of Marx's sociology is the concept of class struggle — the conflict between the *bourgeoisie* (owning class) and the *proletariat* (working class). This struggle is rooted in capitalism's structural exploitation, where economic power enables the wealthy to dominate the labouring majority. Marx viewed socialism as the inevitable counterforce to capitalism, emerging from its internal contradictions. Religion and the state often acted, in his view, as agents preserving the status quo, legitimizing exploitation and preventing the working class from achieving emancipation. Marx regarded religion, particularly Christianity in its institutional form, as an expression of alienation and a tool of social control (Stewart, 129-152). In contrast to Hegel's view of Christianity as the highest form of truth, Marx saw it as sustaining existing inequalities rather than challenging them. His critique did not reject the moral ideals religions could promote but condemned their failure to enact them in real social contexts.

Marx's analysis invites scrutiny of all religious traditions - Islam, Hinduism, Confucianism, Taoism - on whether they truly embody their professed values in practice. Philosophical inquiry here associates with John Dewey's assertion that the value of religion lies not in dogma or metaphysical proofs but in its lived capacity to inspire constructive social change. The measure of any belief system's truth is its ability to address injustice, dismantle oppressive structures and promote collective well-being. John

Dewey (1934) observes that many religious believers, discontented with traditional "proofs" for God's existence—such as ontological, cosmological and teleological arguments—are increasingly influenced by the expanding application of scientific methods across disciplines (11). For Dewey, the religious value lies in its function and effect, which manifest differently in each individual. Sources of inspiration may range from devotion to a cause, poetry or intellectual reflection (14). Dewey asserts that confidence in rigorous inquiry neither limits truth to a single channel nor asserts universality only to confine it to one method. It avoids reliance on dogma or fixed theory for certainty, instead trusting that natural human–environment interactions, explored through scientific methods, will enhance intelligence and knowledge (26). Consequently, religious knowing and experience are not confined to prescribed practices or singular experiences, but remain linked to the pursuit of social transformation. While these positions challenge the idea of accepting or rejecting religious values in fixed terms, the aim here is not to dismantle Marxist theory. Rather, despite its limitations, Marx's social analysis—particularly his framework for addressing class struggle and dismantling man-made structures of conflict—remains a vital instrument for advancing global well-being. That is to say, Marx's philosophical and sociological approach calls for a paradigm shift in examining the dynamics of power, economy and belief. His method challenges both secular and religious institutions to confront the realities of oppression, making it an enduring framework for those committed to building a more equitable world.

3. Methodological Thoughts Vs Power Structures

Marx's opposition to religion and his socio-political thought have already been outlined; to situate his methodology within the broader arenas of political power, a brief analysis of Hegel is essential. Hegel's philosophy, though shaped by diverse origins—Plato, the Neo-Platonists, Alexandrian Church Fathers, and mystics—was profoundly marked by the German Enlightenment. As a young student, Hegel was influenced by Lessing, Rousseau,

Kant, and Fichte, whose *Critique of Revelation* influenced his university years (Mueller, 66). The Enlightenment's long arc of intellectual change left a lasting imprint on his thought.

From a political-theoretical perspective, Hegel envisioned the state as the embodiment of society's rational will—its highest political consciousness—unified in a single sovereign. For Hegel, monarchy was not simply a political arrangement but the ideal form of governance, where the king personified the ruling will of the state. In this vision, the channel of ultimate authority narrowed to one individual. Marx rejected this architectural narrowing of power and political space. He dismantled both the philosophical scaffolding and political implications of Hegel's constitutional monarchy, asserting instead that citizenship—shared sovereignty—was fundamental to human nature. Democracy, for Marx, represented the wider sphere of governance where power flowed through the people (MacIntyre, 35–36; Yack, 713).

Marx's critique did not arise from an established methodological arsenal; early on, he grappled with the challenge of confronting entrenched socio-economic structures without a fully developed framework (Kanaya, 60–61). Later, Marx and Engels would propose their "science of history," grounded in a specific conception of the social world and its class struggles, situating methodology within historical context, structure, and function (García-Quesada, 18). This "unity" of history and natural science formed the basis for interpreting the social world (Morris, 16). Yet Wilhelm Jerusalem (1914) challenged this methodological edifice, arguing that historians should study humanity in its totality, not merely the evolution of states and their territorial domains. He faulted Marx and Engels for neglecting certain historical stages, though he conceded the enduring heuristic value of their approach (114).

MacIntyre (1984) notes that Marx's intellectual formation was influenced by Enlightenment Christianity, inherited from his father and mediated through Hegel and Feuerbach (29). While Marx diverged from Hegel's idealism, he did not abandon the dialectical method; rather, he repurposed it, placing humans and

nature at the center (Kappen, 53–54). This adaptation allowed Marx to traverse Hegel's conceptual frameworks while re-engineering them for socio-economic critique.

Both Hegel and Marx shared a teleological understanding of history: recurring events in the world's political and social networks always unfold with purpose. Yet their agents of change diverged sharply. Hegel saw freedom realized within the rational state, often personified in monarchy; Marx, by contrast, placed transformation in the hands of the collective, grounded in the material evolution of production systems (Williams, 198).

That is to say, Hegel's methodology concentrated political sovereignty in the narrowest channel of authority—embodied monarchy—while Marx sought to broaden the avenues of power, redistributing authority through democratic citizenship and dismantling the class structures that restrict social mobility. Though their philosophical starting points differed—abstraction for Hegel, pragmatism for Marx—both remain central to understanding the flow of ideas and authority through the shifting architecture of political power.

4. Imagery of Opium: An Auxiliary Approach

In 1843, when Marx composed *A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right* (CHPR), opium was still legal and widely employed as a medicine. Nevertheless, it was also a commonly abused substance, known for both its soothing and hallucinatory effects (Pedersen, 357). Similar to Pedersen, Andrew M. McKinnon (2006) observes that opium was regarded as a valuable commodity in early nineteenth-century Europe. By century's end, however, alternative remedies had largely displaced it, and medical as well as moral reformers had thoroughly demonized its use. Marx employed "opium" as a metaphor for religion (12). What did Marx intend by using this metaphor, and why did it carry a negative connotation from a religious standpoint? McKinnon (17) emphasizes that, despite its role as an inexpensive and effective treatment—especially for the poor—Marx's usage framed religion in an adverse light. Opium was, in Marx's era, an accessible means of easing suffering, yet its

habitual use could mask deeper causes of pain without resolving them. Marx himself is reported to have consumed opium, alongside other "medicines" such as arsenic and creosote. In other words, Marx's metaphor likened religion to a palliative—seemingly offering hope, healing, or the promise of a better world, yet ultimately a symptom of a disordered society and potentially harmful in itself (Boer, 94). This image suggests that religion functions as a temporary escape, concealing rather than confronting the structural roots of oppression. Nicholas Churchich (1990) likewise argues that Marx deployed the metaphor to dismiss religion's capacity for liberation, portraying it instead as an expression of helplessness, alienation, and resignation to a hostile world devoid of real hope (145). The notion of alienation, however, predates Christianity (307).

Jingyi Jenny Zhao (2024) notes that Xunzi believed every individual must transform themselves by valuing propriety over personal gain, living harmoniously with others, and shunning dishonour (138). Even in Xunzi's age, alienation was evident—though in a moral and social framework distinct from Marx's nineteenth-century context. For Marx, alienation reflected systemic inequalities, whereas in Xunzi's time it related more to breaches of ethical duty. In both eras, however, a loss of harmony and hope was unmistakable. While Marx's analysis of alienation resonated strongly in secular thought, it also served as a critical tool for advocating moral progress and justice. Still, there is a risk of misunderstanding his use of alienation by conflating it with the Christian concept of sin. The Christian notion involves separation from God, self, others, and nature—yet the Bible offers no explicit sociological reading of alienation. In the theocratic culture of Jesus' time, socio-structural alienation would have been inconceivable, as the prevailing order was seen as divinely ordained. In today's scientific age, however, Christians must grapple with the realities of structural alienations to live faithfully and effectively (Kappen, 56).

Drawing from the earlier discussion of Hegel and Marx, it is clear that Christianity is not founded solely upon idealism or materialism, but on the praxis of addressing socioeconomic,

religious and political realities. If praxis is understood as humanity's dynamic interaction with its environment, Christianity can readily accept it as a measure of truth—problems arise only when the term is narrowly confined to economic activity (63). Conversely, the core beliefs of many religions link naturally with holistic development—social, political, and economic. Chinese ethical history offers a parallel view. Yi-ting Zhu (2021) surveys the evolution of Chinese moral philosophy from the Western Zhou Dynasty (1046–771 BC) to the Qing Dynasty (1616–1912), tracing how different schools responded to shifting political, economic, and social landscapes. Her research identifies patterns and interconnections among these traditions, highlighting how Confucianism and related thought systems adapted to new historical conditions while preserving foundational values (p. xiii). In other words, Marx's theoretical framework provides a potent analytical instrument for diagnosing and challenging unjust social orders. Yet this does not necessitate denying religion's capacity to engage meaningfully with political, economic and social concerns. The "opium" metaphor, properly understood, serves not as a blanket condemnation of faith but as a critique of its misuse when it becomes a substitute for transformative action.

5. Conclusion

Marx's philosophical, economic and social contributions—emerging within the Judeo-Christian context and grounded in the Western heritage of Christianity—formed part of the wider corridors of thought and power that sought to resolve class conflicts and temper fierce opposition to religion. Understanding Marx's philosophical and social disputes offers a direct route into the intellectual legacy of both Hegel and Marx. While Marx's outlook was shaped by the cultural patrimony of Western Europe, Hegel's was equally influenced by Protestant Christianity. Moreover, Hegel envisioned an idealist architecture of authority, where freedom is realized within the rational state; Marx, rejecting this narrow hallway of monarchical sovereignty, advanced a pragmatic vision designed to dismantle class

divisions and grounding history in the evolution of production systems. From a philosophical perspective one can conclude that religious traditions—whether Christian or drawn from the long development of Chinese ethical thought—can converge with socioeconomic, political and moral aims. These traditions have often moved through the same channels of governance and influence that shape social development. The goal is not to dismantle Marx's theoretical edifice, but to recognize it as a vital tool for examining the labyrinth of power structures, exposing the bottlenecks where authority concentrates, and widening the corridors to allow for broader participation, equity and justice.

REFERENCES

Aman, Kenneth. "Marxism(s) in Liberation Theology." *CrossCurrents*, vol. 34, no. 4, 1984, pp. 427–38. JSTOR, http://www.jstor.org/stable/24458933.

Andrew, Edward. "Marx and the Jews." *European Judaism: A Journal for the New Europe*, vol. 3, no. 1, 1968, pp. 9–14. JSTOR, http://www.jstor.org/stable/41442227.

Blunden, Andy. *Hegel, Marx and Vygotsky: Essays on Social Philosophy*. Brill, 2021.

Boer, Roland. "Karl Marx (1818–1883)." *Religion and European Philosophy: Key Thinkers from Kant to Žižek*, edited by Hollis Phelps and Philip Goodchild, Taylor & Francis, 2017, pp. 123–45.

Burawoy, Michael. "Contemporary Currents in Marxist Theory." *The American Sociologist*, vol. 13, no. 1, 1978, pp. 50–64. JSTOR, http://www.jstor.org/stable/27702312.

Churchich, Nicholas. *Marxism and Alienation*. Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1990.

Desmond, William D. *Hegel's Antiquity*. Oxford University Press, 2020.

Dewey, John. "Religion versus the Religious." *A Common Faith*, Yale University Press, 1962, pp. 1–28. *JSTOR*, http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1npdn9.3.

García-Quesada, George. *Karl Marx, Historian of Social Times and*

Spaces. Brill, 2021.
Gilley, Sheridan. "Christianity and Enlightenment: An Historical Survey." *History of European Ideas*, vol. 1, no. 2, 1981, pp. 103–121. https://doi.org/10.1016/0191-6599(81)90013-9.
Hakim, Aftab Yunis. "Apologetic Evangelical Contextual Christology: A Pragmatic Approach in the Islamic Context (Pakistan)." *Religions*, vol. 15, no. 9, 2024, p. 1032. MDPI, https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15091032.
Kanaya, Yoshiichi. *Marx's Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right: Marx vs. Hegel*. PhD diss., University of Kent, 1998.
MacIntyre, Alasdair. *Marxism and Christianity*. University of Notre Dame Press, 1984.
Marx, Karl, and Friedrich Engels. *The Communist Manifesto*. Oxford University Press, 1848.
Marx, Karl. *On the Jewish Question*. Aristeus Books, 2012.
McKinnon, Andrew M. "Opium as Dialectics of Religion: Metaphor, Expression and Protest." *Marx, Critical Theory, and Religion: A Critique of Rational Choice*, edited by Warren S. Goldstein and Warren Goldstein, Brill, 2006, pp. 67–89.
McLellan, David. *Marxism and Religion: A Description and Assessment of the Marxist Critique of Christianity*. Harper and Row, 1987.
Morris, Brian. *Anthropology and the Human Subject*. Trafford Publishing, 2014.
Rosen, Michael. "Marx, Karl." *The Shorter Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, edited by Edward Craig, Routledge, 2005, pp. 619–31.
Rummel, Rudolph J. *Understanding Conflict and War: Conflict in Perspective*. Sage Publications, 1975.
S Kappen. "Marxist and Christian Dialectics of Liberation." *Journal of Dharma*, vol. 2, no. 1, Mar. 1977, pp. 53–68. https://dvkjournals.in/index.php/jd/article/view/1754.
Stern, Eliyahu. "Marx and the Kabbalah: Aaron Shemuel Lieberman's Materialist Interpretation of Jewish History." *Journal of the History of Ideas*, vol. 79, no. 2, 2018, pp. 285–307. JSTOR, https://www.jstor.org/stable/90021021.

Stewart, Jon. "Hegel's Account of Christianity and Religious Alienation." *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, vol. 13, no. 1, 2021, pp. 129–52. https://doi.org/10.24204/ejpr.v13i1.3017.

Ugochukwu, Obumneme Ezewudo, Ngele Omaka Kalu, and Favour Chukwuemeka Uroko. "A Critical Study of Acts 2–4 in the Light of Karl Marx's 'Religion is the Opium of the Masses.'" *Quaerens: Journal of Theology and Christianity Studies*, vol. 6, no. 1, 2024, pp. 19–48. https://doi.org/10.46362/quaerens.v6i1.227.

Van Ree, Erik. "Productive Forces, the Passions and Natural Philosophy: Karl Marx, 1841–1846." *Journal of Political Ideologies*, vol. 25, no. 3, 2020, pp. 274–93. https://doi.org/10.1080/13569317.2020.1773069.

Williams, H. "The End of History in Hegel and Marx." *The Hegel-Marx Connection*, edited by T. Burns and I. Fraser, Palgrave Macmillan, 2000, pp. 123–45. https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230595934_9.

Wong, Wai Ching Angela. "Modernity and Change of Values: Asian Christian Negotiations and Resistance." *The Oxford Handbook of Christianity in Asia*, edited by Felix Wilfred, Oxford University Press, 2014, pp. 123–45.

Yack, Bernard. "The Rationality of Hegel's Concept of Monarchy." *The American Political Science Review*, vol. 74, no. 3, 1980, pp. 709–20. *JSTOR*, https://doi.org/10.2307/1958152.

Zhao, Jingyi Jenny. *Aristotle and Xunzi on Shame, Moral Education, and the Good Life*. Oxford University Press, 2024.

Zhu, Yi-Ting. *A Panoramic History of Traditional Chinese Ethics*. Springer, 2021.