



Religion as the Opium of the Masses: A Study of the Contemporary Relevance of Karl Marx

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Authors' contributions

This work was carried out in coalition with all the authors. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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ABSTRACT

This article used data from descriptive background to examine the view of Karl Marx on Christian religion in Nigeria today. It examined both the negative and the positive impact of Karl Marx's view on religion in academia. The study also examined the reality of his view on Christianity the present day Nigeria. The study concluded that Christianity of the time of Karl Marx has lost its fervour and could no longer be termed the opium of the masses at least in contemporary Nigeria and therefore suggests a shift from being religious to being 'born again' in order to experience effective and efficient transformation.

Keywords: Religion; opium; masses; contemporary; Karl Marx.

1. INTRODUCTION

The subject of religion has attracted so much scholarly attention especially from sociologists. These include [1-6]. As a result, many schools of

thought have emerged to study and attempt to understand the role of religion in society.

In summary, religion has been viewed from different perspectives. These include

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functionalism, [7-9] and conflict theory of Karl Marx. In the process, such issues as protestant ethics and the spirit of capitalism in Western Europe came to the fore: Significantly, Karl Marx in a seminal work drew the attention of the whole world of the exploitation and the dehumanization of the masses (proletariat) by the ruling class which he referred to as the bourgeoisies [10]. Thus, this paper focuses on Karl Marx and the implications of his thought about religion on contemporary Nigeria.

Marx argues that the teachings of Christianity and its emphasis on heaven as a reward for godliness while on earth is only a ploy by the ruling class to manipulate the masses into docility. The promise of heaven if they remain obedient is to stop the masses from revolting against them? Thus, he describes religion as opium of the people.

Opium use to calm human beings and also make them subservient and submissive even in the face of oppression. Lenin, a close associate of Marx described this as a "spiritual gin"—an intoxicant administered to the masses by the ruling class to ensure their perpetual subjugation and oppression Lee [11]. Lenin contends that this mystical fog was created by the ruling class to ensure that it does not get overthrown by the masses.

These are brilliant ideas which attempt to explain the reality of exploitation in capitalist societies of the past. The challenge of this paper is borne out the fact that the relevance of Karl Marx to contemporary Nigeria has not been sufficiently explored in academic literatures. Though [12] attempted to critically evaluate his idea the connection of Marx work with Christianity in the present day Nigeria was ignored. The present study examines the gap in knowledge bearing in mind that Nigeria is a highly religious country with the largest church auditorium worldwide [13]. Besides, Christians in Nigeria is slightly above 50% of the population [14,15]. Nonetheless, there is so much religiosity without the accompanying spirituality. This is in agreement with the views of Alalibo cited by [16] who refers to the moral decay, corruption, and assorted vices perpetuated by Nigerians and it goes to justify the ranking of Nigeria as a corrupt nation worldwide [17].

This paper proceeds in the following order: Introduction, literature review, summary and concluding remarks.

2. KARL MARX: A BRIEF HISTORY

To put the discussion on Karl Marx in its right perspective, an understanding of his life history is a necessary starting point. His biography becomes a plausible tool of exploration. Therefore, most of the information in this section was obtained from the [17] and paraphrased accordingly.

Karl Marx was born on the 6th of May 1818 in Germany. He was originally of Jewish parentage but later converted to Protestantism in 1824 so that he could avoid anti-Semitic laws and its consequent persecutions. His early experiences in life made him to reject religion and become an atheist. Marx read law and philosophy to a doctorate level at the University of Berlin in 1841. In the course of his academic career, he made an important contact which changed his life and that was with Geog Wilhelm Friedrich von Hogel. This marked a turning point in his academic work because together with him and other brilliant minds he started to think of socio economic political theories.

After graduation, he went into journalism and subsequently became an editor of the liberal (open to new ideas) Cologne newspaper. Due to his radicalism, he suffered various forms of persecution and denials. For example, his paper was banned by the Berlin government; he was also expelled from France in 1845 at the instigation of the Prussian government. This forced him to return to Brussels where he founded the German workers party. He was at the same time a member of the communist league in Brussels and this forced him to go back to Cologne. Once again, he was further expelled from France because of his radicalism. Though he moved and settled in England, Britain denied him citizenship and thus he lived there as a stateless exile. Between August 1852 and March 1862 he was the correspondent of the New York Daily Tribune and he contributed a total of 355 articles. He was a prolific writer and two of his most famous books are:

- Communist Manifesto;
- Das capital;

The ideals, philosophy, thoughts and writings of Karl Marx eventually led to Marxism. The social, economic and political theory which emanated from his writings were responsible for the academic explosion across the globe. He became a world figure when, based on his

philosophy, the masses organized the Russian revolution (1917-21) when the commoners overthrew the government which had lasted three hundred years in a revolt led by Vladimir Lenin an avid and long life follower of Karl Marx. Such was the strength and academic appeal of Marxism that many other theories have emanated from it. One of such was the dependency theory of [18-20]. Other writers include [21] and who all based their writings on Marxism. Karl Marx envisioned a society that is classless. His view of society was that of the rule of the proletariat (commoners). It fore saw a society in which the bourgeoisies or upper class will be subordinated to the commoners, it was also a society where the means of production (Land in particular) will be communally owned. With this, a classless society will be ushered in.

Marxism has been criticized as historically inaccurate, scientifically weak and logically inaccurate. The message of Karl Marx of an earthly paradise (classless society) has provided millions with hope and a new meaning of life. One therefore agrees the Austrian economist Joseph A. Schumpeter that "Marxism is religion" and Marx is its prophet [17].

According to [18] Karl Marx was a hugely influential revolutionary thinker and a philosopher. He championed the cause of the downtrodden and oppressed but did not live long enough to see his ideals come to fruition.

3. THE POSITION OF KARL MARX ON RELIGION

In the society of Karl Marx time, he felt touched by the extreme inequality, oppression, human degradation exploitation, enslavement and deep suffering of the masses. Thus, he started studying alienation which eventually led him to study religion especially Christianity. Marx believed that Christian doctrines of obedience to authority, gentility, humility and other related issues were manipulations by the upper class or the bourgeois to keep the masses perpetually subservient. Thus, he believed that religion was an instrument to dominate the masses and therefore opium of the masses. He condemned the view implicit in religious teachings that anyone who engages in riot such as rebellion, open confrontation and strife is not fit for God's kingdom. He likened the adherence to Christian teachings to the drinking of opium.

Karl Marx also extends his thought and worries to capitalism. Capitalism according to Marx is the

economic system based on the private ownership of the means of production and it is a system driven by the profit motive. This system otherwise known as free enterprise explains that profit is only made by the investment of labour. Profit is only made when the masses who offer their labour are paid below the value of their contributions. This according to him amounts to exploitation. Capitalism is contemptuous of government intervention in the economy but encourages the intervention of the forces of demand and supply to fix prices. As a result Marx as cited by [19] argued that religion is the moan of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, the sense of senseless conditions. It is the opium of the people. In summary Marx believed that the ruling class only subjugates the masses while using religion as a subterfuge.

4. MARX THEORY OF RELIGION: CRITIQUE

Marx's idea has received reaction that are sharply divided and sometimes diametrically opposed. Though the force and sheer strength of its arguments are so powerful that it triggered off the Russian Revolution yet, it has been hotly debated and seriously condemned among some scholars worldwide. For instance, while [20] contend that it is very difficult to understand the work of Marx. The above viewpoints also corroborate [21] who argues that his work has been greatly misunderstood and interpreted. The term Marxism according to him does not make any meaning to some persons.

However, [11] submits that Marx work on religion is a sound academic material from all spheres of human discipline. But [22] appreciates the fact that though Marx felt for the downtrodden, yet he lost sight of the fact that religion is not what Man can fully comprehend. No matter how Man felt for the oppressed he does not have the power to save them from oppression. Lauer further maintains that Marx was not entirely against God or neither was he out to get rid of God. He was only out to free man from himself and from enslavement to religion which is a creation of man "it is not God but belief in God which must go" (p. 54). Another line of criticism is that Marx failed to realise that the attitude of worshippers and ministers of God might run contrary to the dictates of Christianity as reflected in the oppression of the masses by the oneness of the means of production and the political class who claim to be religious. Karl

Marx has also come under a severe and a sustained attack by some Christian adherents [23]. The major undoing of Marx and his protégés therefore is the persecution of the Christian faith. We consider this flaw as a great mistake because no one attacks God and go scot free, except if the mercy of God is extended to such an individual. However, this view could be exposed to intense debate in the academia. Some scholars may be in support while others may speak against it. However, it arose from the point of reasoning of the authors of this paper in line with Christian religion.

In spite of all these, Marx and Marxism have carved a niche for itself in academic discourse generally. His ideas have led to the emergence of eminent scholars are great thinkers and prolific writers in their own rights worldwide. Some of them include but certainly not limited to [24-38]. In Nigeria, scholars of Marxist extraction pervade the literature [39-43], with a great influence on the nation's higher education system.

5. KARL MARX AND CHRISTIAN RELIGION

At the time of Karl Marx, Christianity was the religion of the western world which only got to other parts of the world through the instrumentality of colonialism. Then, it could be said that Christianity was in its pure form. The lives of early Christian missionaries showcased all the virtues as stated in the Bible. However, Marx felt that those teachings were only placatory designed by the ruling class not only to calm frayed nerves but to perpetually subjugate the masses. With the passage of time and transfer to different environments the ideal teachings of Christianity was watered down. The reality is that there is so much of what could be described as religiosity or superficial Christianity to the detriment of the real teachings of Christ. Thus, in the present day, Christianity from all conceivable evidences appears to have lost its fervour.

6. AN EVALUATION OF MARX THEORY OF CHRISTIANITY: RELIGION AND CONTEMPORARY NIGERIA

According to [13] Christians account for 50.8% of the Nigerian population. This translates to the fact that Christianity has a significantly strong presence in Nigeria. Yet, vices such as violence, jealousy, envy, corruption, abortion, prostitution,

stealing, child trafficking, kidnapping, adultery, fornication, hatred, 'academic terrorism', wickedness, exploitation and victimization, greed, perversion of justice and many others are still very visible. Given this, [44] maintains that the greatest scourge facing Nigeria is not HIV/AIDS or other forms of challenges but hypocrisy fuelled by ignorance. Majority of those who are confessing Christianity don't seem to know what it takes to be Christians, hence, their inability to demonstrate Godly virtues that would have led Nigeria to greatness.

Marx maintained in his time that Christians were heavenly conscious and their desire to enter the kingdom of God after death was so strong to warrant his description of religion as the opium of the masses and it prevented the proletariats from revolting against the bourgeois.

Dwelling on Marx, Christians were enduring victimization, oppression, exploitation and other forms of injustice because heaven was their target. Also, they were avoiding fornication, revolting against any constituted authority, involving in the embezzlement of public fund, divorcing their spouses, engaging in fornication or adultery, hatred and other vices which are regarded as sins because they cherished eternity.

The above mentioned atrocities are not only prevalent among Christians in contemporary Nigeria [44]; they are now regarded as the normal ways of life. Thus, any pastor who preaches against these sinful ways of life becomes the enemy of many Christians and his Church will be deserted for Churches that provide comfort zones for sins and iniquities. This shows that the quest for eternity in the time of Marx has been replaced with worldliness in contemporary Nigeria.

Karl Marx's period was associated with medieval era and there was a strong spirit of conformity to the dictates of the Church. But In contemporary times that is characterized by enlightenments, the spirit of conformity seems to have been replaced with disobedience.

It is upon this background that the idea of Karl Marx on religion in contemporary Nigeria is highly debatable. This finds an easy explanation for the following reasons.

Relevant literatures are replete with protest, rancour, anarchy and leadership tussles in many Christian institutions [45-47] across Nigeria.

Some situations in some Churches have degenerated to: litigations in the courts of law [48,49], death of many Christians [50,51] and brake away for the establishment of Churches by the aggrieved Christians [52,53].

Moreover, the mode of operation of business transaction of many Christian organisations is not different from the capitalists. In fact, some are worse than many capitalists in the present day Nigeria. Before any wise person can adequately engage in any business transaction with a Christian or a pastor in Nigeria today, he or she must think twice, otherwise, he or she may regret the idea.

In other words, the emphasis has been shifted from eternity to materialism or prosperity [54,55]. Although prosperity is the plan of God for Christians [56], but when prosperity is sought for to the detriment of holiness and righteousness, as evident in many Nigerian Churches today, it becomes an issue of concern and a major problem to national development [56-60].

7. CONCLUDING REMARKS

In this article the relevance of the philosophy and thought of Karl Marx on Christianity in Nigeria. The paper argues that religion as opium of the people is no longer wholly applicable to many Nigerians. This is in the light of corruption, nepotism, strife, and different degrees of intolerance which have found their way into the Church in contemporary times. To worsen the situation, the yearning for eternity which is the bedrock of Christianity which the early Christians pursued rigorously has been replaced with the crave for materialism in recent times. In a nutshell, Christianity of the time of Karl Marx has lost its fervour and could no longer be termed the opium of the masses, at least in Nigeria of today.

COMPETING INTERESTS

Authors have affirmed that no conflicting interests exist.

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