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Marxist Dialectics of Class and Religion: A Critical Appraisal

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Abstract:

There is a permanent conflict between ruling religious ideology and the religious ideology of common people, where each class wants to express its class interest through their own religiosity. Therefore, the same religion simultaneously reconciles the social contradiction as a set of moral means or values, and on the other hand it also revealed the contending class interest. The first form of religious ideology acts as a social mechanism which conciliates the psychological needs of different classes. On the contrary, the second form of religious ideology act as a intersect class consciousness, i.e. the subordinate and the superordinate class consciousness. This kinds of intersect class consciousness can be understood as a fissure in cultural system.

Key Word: Class, Ideology, Religion, False Consciousness, Dialectic, Social Control.

1. Introduction: Any Marxist analysis of religion begins from the understanding of Karl Marx and Frederick Engels. By criticizing the theory of other functionalist (like Comte and Durkheim) Marxists provides an alternative theory of religion. The central theme in the Marxists critical analysis of religion is the ideology. Generally, from the perspective of ideology religion is considered as a set of beliefs or an ideological frame work that plays an essential role in the society and in which people find their real position. This understanding of religion is common to all the sociologists. But, for Marx, religious beliefs represented in such a significant way wherein people were exploited, oppressed and dominated by the powerful class of the few within the society. From this aspect, Marx considered, religion is not just a system of beliefs or practices; rather it is an ideology of a particular class and an ideology of false consciousness.

To Marx, religious beliefs or ideologies provide a sense of human well being and a sense of contentment which is an illusion. It is a situation where people were oppressed and exploited in their real and material world, and consequently the illusory happiness became a substitute for real happiness. Therefore, to Marx, illusory religious belief is the symptom of real oppression and exploitation. For Marx, it is not true that simply by eliminating the oppressive role of religion, people would come to realize their real and material interest. Religious beliefs and ideologies do not exists simply as a set of beliefs imposed upon the gullible, like any form of ideology. On the contrary, religious beliefs and ideas originate out

of such conditions under which people experienced their social life. So, ideologies are deeply rooted on the condition under which people live in any society.

2. Marxist Understanding of Religion as an Ideology: Marx understands the theory of religion in terms of a general social theory which has two major concept- ideology and alienation. Many of the sociologists understand that from the perspective of ideology religion plays a role of powerful intergathering force in the society. For them, religion is the powerful intergathering force of the society since it provides a mode of feelings of togetherness, common bonds and sharing values etc. But, Marx did not recognise the ideological aspect of religion in terms of a function of social consolidation as a whole. On the contrary, his basic theoretical approach involved with the idea that society is composed of various antagonistic social classes. Marx saw religion as one of the mechanism of social control apprehended by the ruling class to enforce their ideological domination of other classes in the society: “The ruling ideas of an era are ever the ideas of its ruling class. Ideas have the power to rule, and they do so with more subtlety, and therefore with more effectiveness, than guns” [John Rains 2002; 3].

In this perspective, for Marx, religion is not only an integrating ideology which explained the society, but also it served the purpose of legitimizing the unequal distribution of property in the society. For instance, through religion the social world could be legitimately and easily portrayed as god-given and beyond the power of man to change. Religion is also legitimized the economic exploitation since god has created this world and god has the plan for the world and of the people in it. Therefore, the world of god is not the place of people to questioning this scheme of things. In the same way poverty, inequality and discrimination could also be portrayed as a virtue since it is a means of achieving the kingdom of god in afterlife. At the same time the power of religion as an ideology limp (dull) the pain of suffering with its false promises of eternal life, reincarnation and so forth. Religion limp the suffering of majority of the powerless classes in many ways, such as- by giving promises of paradise of eternal bliss in afterlife, by making suffering and oppression as a virtue, by offering the hope of supernatural intervention to solve the worldly problems and by the justification of social order or maintaining the hierarchical status quo. Religion encourages people to accept their fortune on the earth by promising salvation or *moksha*. For Marx, religious belief in a particular sense is the indication of social problems faced by people in their everyday life. Therefore, “Religious suffering is at the same time an expression of real suffering and a protest against real suffering” [Karl Marx 1982; 1].

If religion represents as an illusory or false happiness, now the question raise how does Marx views the true nature of social reality? Marx’s theory of religion proclaimed us the way in which Marxist scholar generally views the nature as social reality. For instance, when Marx argues that religion is an illusory happiness, it must follow that he had an idea of non-illusory real happiness. Simply, when someone argue that something is false, it must follow that in order to do this that person must claim what is true. In this perspective, Marx claimed that the social world has a basic or fundamental reality and the nature of this reality is continuously mystified by ideologies such as religion. The reason is that this reality

excluded the ruling class hence their attempts to misrepresent the nature of social reality in their favor. Marx gives more importance to disclose the ideological distortions created by powerful ruling classes in the society as they require justifying and imposing their privileged position in the society [Bryan S. Turner 1999; 63 – 70].

The intended goal of Marx and Engels was to constitute an alternative theory of ideology which directly relates the ideological beliefs of the divergent classes rather than monopoly mental production of dominant class for their surveillance. In the preface to “***A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy***” (1859) Marx conceptualized his views on class ideology by stating that each distinctive class possessed an ideology by which they directly express their class interest. Even, to Marx, each mode of production gives birth to at least two opposed corresponding ideologies of subordinate and superordinate, oppressed and oppressor [Karl Marx 2010; 25 – 29]. The subordinate class ideology argues that religion constitutes the base of social integration either by social cement (i.e. Durkheim’s theory of collective consciousness) or social opium, whereas the superordinate class ideology argues that religion is the principle of class solidarity. Therefore, it is very difficult to acknowledge a general social theory of religion by eliminating varieties of social classes those who are different from each other not only by contradictory class interest, but also by classed based ideologies [Bryan S. Turner 1999; 78].

3. Religion and Ruling Class Containment: In order to acquire the appropriate knowledge of how the ruling class takes advantages of religion to attempt to distort and mystify social reality in favor of their class interest, we must have to understand the social structure of a particular class and the role that religion plays in the society. In the ruling class social system (e.g. Capitalism), the structure of society is fundamentally unequal and each of distinct social classes can be defined in relation to their different relationship to the means of production. The ruling class is the most powerful class in the society since their economic ownership postulate both political and ideological power. For Marx, religious belief does not emerge to dream-up the power and ideology of ruling class. Rather it arises out of material condition of social life. The oppressed and subordinate class wants in religion what they lack in their material life, such as status, comfort and so forth. As Marx postulates that religion can be seized easily by the hand of powerful social classes and can be used to their economical, political and ideological domination and exploitation since it is an ideological framework [Marx and Engels 2015; 36 – 42]. Though the ruling class control and directs religious beliefs as a mode of justification to continued domination over other classes, we have to remind it that religion is a powerful force in its own right. In a particular circumstance, religion potentially can become a powerful force for social change.

According to Marxism, any form of social change which does not attack and defeat the basic reason of social inequality, discrimination, exploitation and suppression; is simply doomed to reproduce the previous exploitative circumstances. For example, we can discuss here about religious revolution. From a Marxist point of view, although sometimes social changes occurred from the outcome of religious revolution, but in most of the cases religious revolution transform only the peripheral structure of the society in which little or nothing to be done to change the material condition under which majority suppressed class

lived. Such kind of transformation, for Marx, is a reactionary which gives more importance to look back to a supposedly organized society, rather than in revolutionary [Anthony Giddens and David Held (Ed) 1982; 3 – 12].

Religion as a form of class ideology served to distract the suppressed class from the real cause of their misery and exploitation. But at the same time, such exploited classes emphasize the liberating aspect of religious ideas as a means of attacking oppression. According to Marx, religious belief as a class ideology is adapted by powerful social classes as a means of exerting their hegemony over other social classes. Thus, Marx argued that the role of religion in the development of capitalism is different [Bhikhu Parekh 1982; 136]. Max Weber also sees the role of religion in the capitalist society in the same way. Marx, like Durkheim, saw religion as conservative social force, whereas Weber has argued that religion can be a force of social change in a large scale. For Weber, religion often plays the role of an instrument that legitimates the situation of a political and economical domination. Here, legitimating is understood by the ruling class as a sanction of their privileged circumstances and as an instrument of mental compensation. For instance, here we can discuss the Weber's idea of protestant ethics and the spirit of capitalism. Max Weber attempted to establish the connection between political or economical statuses of a particular class (capitalism) and its religious (protestant ethics) tendencies. According to him, religious belief or doctrine are closely associated with the statuses of believers of a particular class. For example, proletariat, bourgeoisie and peasant classes have different material interest and according to that distinct material interest they predisposed to the reception of different kinds of religious messages [Max Weber 2005; 3 – 13].

4. Modern Critical Theories on Religion, Class and ideology: Antonio Gramsci, the post-Marxian scholar, with the help of the concept of hegemony argues that cultural institution (like religion) became woven into the fabric of people's perception of the social world. Gramsci, like Marx, argues that religious belief represent a way of thinking about the social life which can be exploited by the economical and political powerful social classes to their private purpose. Religion as an ideology shared among the various social classes and this very reason religion is such a potential powerful ideology. As Marx argues that religious ideas alienate people from their real exploitative world, but on the other hand ruling class benefited mostly by the religious ideology as it helps them to be united and maintained their status quo in the society [Antonio Gramsci 1992; 52 – 57].

Nicos Poulantzas, a Greek-French Marxist political sociologist, has developed the Gramsci's humanistic Marxist theory by using the concept of relative autonomy. He used the concept of relative autonomy to explain how religion can act in this way. According to him, at a certain time individuals within an institution may be interpreting their role in a way which appears to challenge the dominant institutional ideology. This is particularly true for the upper class individual (such as priest, manager and so forth), where their position in a power structure gives them a relative freedom to act in various ways. But this kind of freedom is relative since it has its own limits. In case of liberation theology movement, we can say that the hierarchy of catholic church never welcome this type of ideological form

and has try to limit its impact with various degrees of success [Nicos Poulantzas 1976; 13 – 23].

In this perspective, we can look at the ideas of Bryan S. Turner. In his book *“Religion and Social Theory”* Turner adopts a more critical tone. Turner gives more importance on dominant class ideology. He argues that instead of seeing religion as a part of way in which ruling class somehow exploited the ruled class through cultural institution such as religion, we should concentrate the ideological impact of religion in a more subtle way. According to Turner, a ruling class is a dominant class as they have the power to exploit all other classes. Even if the other classes do not ready to accept their exploitation, the repressive state apertures such as police and army etc. are all in a place to insure that any form of rebellion unlikely to be successful. Here the basic argument of Turner is that religious behavior and organization should be understood in terms of its significance of the social cohesion of a dominant class, rather than in terms of its implicit ideological role as a form of social control [Bryan S. Turner 1999; 63 – 69].

In his book *“Religion and Social Theory”* Turner argues that in feudal Britain religious beliefs served to unite the ruling class rather than to justify ideologically the peasantry’s own oppressive condition. The peasantry class was largely indifferent to the views of the church, as their whole life was focused almost exclusively upon the need to stay alive. Turner considered that the historical evidence suggests that it was mainly lower middle class who associated with religious organization. The working class had induced but threatened to take any sort of religious organization seriously [Bryan S. Turner 1999; 136 – 141].

For Turner, the significance of religion lays in its ability to provide a set of universal, moral guidance for ruling class behavior, especially in relation to marriage and the inheritance of property. In the capitalist social system, the emerging bourgeoisie class ensures that the property right should be transmitted from one to next generation. Therefore, to bourgeoisie class sexual behavior have to be determined in such a way so that it ensures and legitimate their heir could only be identified through inheritance. Here, religion provides a moral frame work for this pattern of behavior by involving a form of legal marriage, by controlling and legitimating sexual behavior, by ensuring a coherent family system for the transmission of property right [Bryan S. Turner 1999; 110 – 111].

Therefore, the significance of religion depends upon in its ability to provide a legitimating system of social monitoring for the bourgeoisie class in capitalism. For Turner, religious organization has a significant particular phrase in capitalist development, primarily because it provides an ideological framework for the justification on patriarchy and primogeniture. In the modern society where this form of inheritance has declined in importance, religious activity has consequently declined as a feature of upper-class social organization.

5. Conclusion: In Marxist analysis, religion is not only a medium of support of the ruling class status quo in the society. It is also evident that religion as a social force is capable of being used to liberate the people from their oppressive and exploitative condition. The development of Liberation theology in south America, for example, is a form of

Catholicism in which priest have argued that church should represent the legitimate grievances of the poor class, rather than helping the ruling class to consolidate their oppression of their population.

Here, the most important thing is to understand that religion is not only used by a particular class of the society, rather both the exploiter and the exploited used religion for different purposes. Both the classes used religion as a weapon for the attainment of their intended goal. The ruling class used religion to exploit the other, whereas the oppressed class practiced religion to unite against oppression and exploitation. [Alan Woods, Marxism and Religion, www.marxists.org]

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