

## **KARL MARX'S CRITICISM ON RELIGION**

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### **Abstrak**

*Artikel ini membahas tentang keunikan agama di antara disiplin akademis lainnya. Agama hampir secara eksklusif didekati sebagai objek studi. Studi agama menjadi studi tentang agama. Makalah ini menyajikan secara deskriptif kritik Islam di kritik Marx tentang agama. Penelitian ini kemudian menemukan bahwa Islam dan Marxisme pada dasarnya memiliki kontradiksi mencolok terutama dalam pandangan ke-tauhid-an. Marx berdasar pada filosofi Marxisme; manusia membuat agama, dan agama tidak membuat manusia. Namun, Islam meyakini konsep spiritual yang tak terbatas di mana Islam menggambarkan manusia sebagai tanah; lahan; tanah, atau dapat dikatakan bahwa agama, dalam hal ini, Allah menciptakan manusia, bukan sebaliknya.*

*This article discusses about the uniqueness of religion among other academic disciplines. Religion is almost exclusively approached as an object of study. This paper presents a descriptive criticism of Islam in Marx's critique of religion. The study then found that Islam and Marxism is essentially a contradiction particularly striking in view of the unity-an. Marx, based on the philosophy of Marxism; man-made religion and religion does not make the man. However, Muslims believe in the spiritual concept of the infinite in which Islam describes the man as the ground; land; ground, or it can be said that religion, in this case, God created man, not vice versa.*

**Key words: Marx, criticism, religion**

## A. Introduction

Karl Marx was born on May 5, 1818 and died on March 14, 1883. He was a German economist, philosopher, and revolutionary whose writings form the basis of the body of ideas known as Marxism. With the aid of Friedrich Engels, he produced much of the theory of modern socialism and communism. Marx's father, Heinrich, was a Jewish lawyer who had converted his family to Christianity partly in order to preserve his job in the Prussian state. Karl Marx himself was baptized in the Evangelical church.<sup>1</sup>

In 1837, Karl Marx (1818-1883) transferred to Berlin University; it was with the intention of continuing his study of law. However, despite his best intentions, he was inexorably drawn into the study of philosophy in general and the Hegelian philosophical system in particular. A decade earlier, this would have meant adhering to the unified outlook which had come to dominate thought in Prussia. By the late 1830s, that outlook was in a state of decomposition.<sup>2</sup> As a student at the University of Berlin, young Marx was strongly influenced by the philosophy of George Hegel and by a radical group called Young Hegelians, who attempted to apply Hegelian ideas to the movement against organized religion and the Prussian autocracy. In 1841, Marx received a doctorate in philosophy,<sup>3</sup> and had been writing many master pieces. However, in this case, I am interested in discussing the criticism on religion from his perspective.

## B. Karl Marx's and Religion

Unlike other great thinkers in discussing religion, Nietzsche, for instance, states that "Religion is a part of a slave rebellion on morals-a substitute for the unsuccessful slave rebellion on reality."<sup>4</sup> While for Durkheim, "Religion is in a very real sense simply the

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<sup>1</sup>John Raines, Marx on Religion: *The Criticism of Religion* [Part Four] (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002), p. 169

<sup>2</sup>Cyril Smith, "Karl Marx and Human Self-Creation" Submitted on October 27<sup>th</sup>, 2005 by libcom.org @ www.cix.co.uk/~cyrilsmith/.2002.

<sup>3</sup>Franz Magnis Suseno, "Marx tentang Agama" [ed.] John C. Raines, [trans.] Ilham B. Saenong (Jakarta Selatan: Teraju; Khazanah Pustaka Keilmuan Kelompok Mizan, 2003), p. 72

<sup>4</sup>Andrew Collier, *Transcendence: Critical Realism and God; The Masters of Suspicion and Secularization* [Chapter Six] (Rutledge, Taylor and Francis Group, (London and New York: First Published, 2004), p. 31

worship of society.”<sup>5</sup> In this case, Durkheim considers that society is not able to exist without some set of either religious rituals or the like. On the other hand, both Freud and Marx come closer without believing such that thing. Freud thinks, “People would be much better off without neurotic illusions of faith but he seems to realize many will still cling to them.”<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, Marx’s critique on religion is more radical and hardly compared with others. He says, “Religion is pure illusion.”<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, he sees in religion a more active moral agency, and religion itself for him is less a device for pacifying suffering than a protest against the suffering. According to him “Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of the heartless world.”<sup>8</sup>

Since he was still young, Marx refused religion. At that moment, he expressed himself as an atheist. What makes Marx said so? I am wondering that he may be pushed by socio-economical factor, intellectual, personal problem or combination of some real things that are difficult to know, or he is possible discontented with his father who insignificantly converted from a Jews to Christian just because of maintaining his career as lawyer in Prussia.<sup>9</sup> In addition, Marx also has no ambition to follow anti-semit that became a tendency of Christian militant in Prussia at that time. Marx also rejected to believe in God, not only Christianity but all religions. In his acknowledgement of dissertation, he put *Prometheus* word from ancient Greek legend as motto, “I do hate all gods”. His reason is that gods do not confess man’s awareness as a highest degree.<sup>10</sup>

Furthermore, Marx does emphasize that believe in gods is a disappointment symbol to drubbing in class struggle. That trust is embarrassing positions which must be ignored, even by the way of constraint.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, for Marx, religion is something that is useless.

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<sup>5</sup>Daniel L. Pals, *Seven Theories on Religion: Religion as Alienation; Karl Marx* [Chapter Four] (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 179

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup>John Raines, *Op.Cit.*

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*,

<sup>10</sup>Karl Marx, “Doctoral Dissertation” in McClellan (ed.), *Early Texts* in Daniel L. Pals, *Seven Theories on Religion: Religion as Alienation; Karl Marx* [Chapter Four] (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 180

<sup>11</sup>Daniel L. Pals, , *Op.Cit.*

Moreover, he states bravely and radically that the condition of the society cannot be better when religion still exists. It means that humans' life of real happiness depends on religion.

According to Marx's theory, life determines consciousness. His theory can also be applied in the context of religion, such as the condition of suffering that alters religious thinking and concept. In addition, religion not only helps the poor and the oppressed people to survive but also to change the condition to be better. For them (the poor and oppressed people), religion can encourage them to respond the enormous problems that caused by globalization, such as poverty, environmental crisis, social justice and the like. All in all, Marx's criticism on religion basically not only offers some challenges and opportunities for religious believers to evaluate and renewal with a new spirit but also functioned in giving best and concrete solution.

The foundation of irreligious criticism is Man makes religion, religion does not make man. Religion is indeed man's self-consciousness and self-awareness as long as he has no found himself or has already lost himself again.<sup>12</sup> But man is not abstract being squatting outside the world. Man is the world of man, state and society. This state and this society produce religion, which is an inverted consciousness of the world, because they are an invented world. A religion is general theory of this world, it is encyclopedic compendium, it is logic in popular form, it is spiritual point, and it is universal basis of consolation and justification.<sup>13</sup> It is the fantastic realization of the human essence since human essence has no acquired any true reality. The struggle against religion is therefore indirectly the struggle against the world whose spiritual aroma is religion. All in all, Marx notes that religion clearly benefits for those people in alienated society, but the ruling class benefit the most because one of the unintended consequences of religious beliefs. The solution to unhappiness is to remove the cause of it rather than escape from it, and the cause of human misery was the capitalist economic system and the solution was its forcible removal and replacement by non-exploitive economic system namely communism.

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<sup>12</sup>Taken from "*Religion is the Opium of the People*" by Producer 11:10pm Sun Nov 11 '01 (Modified on 7:22am Mon Nov 12 '01), it also can be opened at website: [http://la.indymedia.org/display.php3?article\\_id=12841](http://la.indymedia.org/display.php3?article_id=12841).

<sup>13</sup>See...[http://www.baylor.edu/~Scott\\_Moore/texts/Marx\\_Contr\\_Crit.html](http://www.baylor.edu/~Scott_Moore/texts/Marx_Contr_Crit.html)

### **C. Some Critiques to Karl Marx on Religion**

From some arguments mentioned before, it seems that Marx's statement is not only functionalist but also more aggressively reductionism as well. He always describes religion as an effect, an expression, a symptom of something more real and substantial in community life. That is the way; I tend to think that Marx had a monolithically negative view of religion. Here is his further statement:

Religious distress is at the same time the expression of real [economic] distress and the protest against real distress. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, just as it is the spirit of a spiritless situation. It is the opium of the people. The abolition of religion as the illusory happiness of the people is required for their real happiness. The demand about its condition is a demand to give up a condition which needs illusions.<sup>14</sup>

Actually, Marx's rejection on religion is one side that is different from intellectual campaign in order to make all people show religion badness. Up to decade 1840s, Marx has not written a detail explanation about the things mentioning his criticism on religion. He has just written it after passing most important period in his idea, and after reading Ludwich Feuerbach's article, a young Hegelian materialist in Berlin.<sup>15</sup>

According to Magnis-Suseno that actually Marx does not discuss about the function of religion in public whether it is positive or negative. However, he only answers Feuerbach's criticism on religion.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, Marx deals with Feuerbach, but according to Marx that Feuerbach still has not finished it yet. It means, Feuerbach still desists in the middle of the street. That is fine to say that religion

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<sup>14</sup>Karl Marx, "Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right," in Neibuhr, "Marx and Engels on Religion", p. 42 in Daniel L. Pals, *Seven Theories on Religion: "Religion as Alienation"; Karl Marx [Chapter Four]* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996)

<sup>15</sup>Daniel L. Pals, *Op.Cit.*

<sup>16</sup>Franz Magnis Suseno, "Menalar Tuhan" (Yogyakarta: Kanisius Press; Anggota IKAPI, 2006), p. 25

is a fantasy world where man looks for his/her own spirit. But Feuerbach does not enquire why man runs away to fantasy from realizing his/herself in real life. Indeed, Marx states that it happens because of the reality of life, and that means that power structure in public does not permit man to realize the properties essentially. Man runs away to fantasy world because real world grinds him/her. On the other hand, Darmawan says that actually, there is an implicit message about the real mission of religion to against the injustice system and to create new humanity civilization in the ideas of Feuerbach and Marx.<sup>17</sup>

Furthermore, Supono says also that Marx deals with Feuerbach but Marx is still questioning; why Feuerbach states and explains what and how religion is. He, Feuerbach, does not question, why do the people embrace a religion?<sup>18</sup> By this question, may be as a way for Marx, to explore his argument or criticism on religion which was stated by Feuerbach. Indeed, Marx says that people embrace a religion because of suffering and oppression. For Marx, suffering and oppression are two things that cannot be separated. It means, people became suffering or poor because of oppression.

On his most famous statement: "*Religion is public opium*". I assume that Karl Marx said it because he saw the reality in Europe at that time. The religious people were so dominance, and they repressed the oppressed people by the legalization of religion. Some people said that what Marx said (religion is public opium) has a real special context. The utterance actually was addressed for the priests' authority of Christianity religion because they are a part of system repressing public like in France. Most Marxists agree indeed on its common utterance or meaning than its specialty utterance or meaning. They are more seeing what Marx said than seeing why Marx said so. Therefore, they usually also become atheist like Marx.

It is the time, therefore, to review the classical Marxist analysis of religion in order to understand what said and what did not. Such a

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<sup>17</sup>Eko P. Darmawan, "*Agama Itu Bukan Candu; Tesis-tesis Feuerbach, Karl Marx dan Tan Malaka*" (Yogyakarta: Resist Book, 2005), p. 25

<sup>18</sup>Eusta Supono, "*Agama: Solusi atau Ilusi? Kritik atas Kritik Agama Karl Marx*", (Yogyakarta: Published by Komunitas Studi Didaktika, 2002), p. 23

review will enlighten religious believers and others who are sincerely concerned with understanding the Marxist view of religion. But the Marxist analysis of religion has more than an abstract theoretical purpose. In exhibiting religion's social roots, it aids us in the understanding of past society, and through the understanding of past society, present society, which has evolved from it, raising fundamental questions and indicating suggestive answers.

#### **D. Karl Marx on Religion in Islamic Perspective**

Ali Shari'ati<sup>19</sup> critiques Marx in Islamic perspective; he says that the biggest mistake and surprise applied at modern humanity understanding since Diderot and Voltaire where Feuerbach and Marx equalize an ancient Greek myth which is limited by material margins with an ancient holy religious spiritual.<sup>20</sup> They compare and even gallery them become one; the relation of man to Zeus and its relation to Ahuramazda, Rama, Tao, Isa and God. Where those two are contradicted networks.

Furthermore, in maintaining the honour of Islam from Marxism or western ideology, Shari'ati is not only confessing by his close friends but also an atheist like Jean Paul Sartre who is famous with his essentialism statement "I do not have any religion. But, if I am asked to make a choice, I will choose Shari'ati's religion".<sup>21</sup> Based on Sartre's confession, an atheist one, it can be said that Shari'ati's criticism on western ideology like Marx really touches other thinkers' heart not only a Moslem but also non-Moslem thinkers. Sociologically, Shari'ati says, Marx fails to differentiate the form of ownerships, the class relation or civilization and structure domination between

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<sup>19</sup>Dr. Ali Shari'ati (1933-1977) who criticizes philosophy and idea of West in Islamic Perspective. He was born in 1933 in Mazinan, a hinterland countryside of Mashhad in North-East of Khurasan, in obedient and viscid family of his religious tradition. He ended his middle and low education in Mashhad. Then continue his further study at Maktab higher school. Over there, he associated with youth from those who earn low income. There, he felt also the suffering and the difficulties of life.

<sup>20</sup>Ali Shari'ati, "*Marxism and Other Western fallacies an Islamic Critique*", (Bandung: Mizan Press, 1980), p. 53

<sup>21</sup>*Ibid.*,

leaders and who are mastered by them.<sup>22</sup> This stand-out failure can be seen at industrialism era of Lenin and Stalin. Indeed, Shari'ati express that the third world nations will not obtain self-confident to move his society forward except returning to their own culture roots. For Shari'ati, the model of Marxism is not only unsuitable with Islamic society, but also confusing. Because it refuses the absolute creation of humanity values and yields man as economic creature solely. Nevertheless, Shari'ati's fulminating does not mean that he deals with the disposal idea of masterpieces communism.

Based on some opinions mention before, it can be concluded that Marx has refused religion. It means that he expressed himself as an atheist. Here, I am still in doubt that he may be pushed by social economics factor, intellectual, personal problem or combination of some real things that are difficult to know, or he is possible discontented with his father who insignificantly moved from a Jews to Christian just because of maintaining his career as lawyer in Prussia. Furthermore, Marx says that he rejects to believe in God, not only Christianity but all religions. For me, it cannot be said all religions generally because it may be one religion different with other religions.

## **E. Conclusion**

I myself see Marx's statement that what religion offered was not real solution but real illusion, that's maybe fine for unbelievers (like him), or for those who believe that the life in this world is the eternal life. However, for me, what religion offered is not real illusion or illusionary happiness but real solution or way to get real happiness for those who are not addicted by religion. I mean, for those who are not only depend on religion (God) by receiving their own destiny (receive the way they are without doing any effort) but also keep their relation with others. As a believer, I believe that religion (God) will never change one destiny unless he/she changes his/her own destiny, as mention in the Holy Qur'an, (QS. 13: 11).

On the other side, we should also try to look for the equation between Islam and Marxism such as in aspect of ideology including all life dimensions and man ideas. Marxism idea also has struggled to constitute every human life, material aspect, spiritual, philosophy, individual, economic and social in context materialism. Indeed, there are at least two parallelisms of Islam and Marxism. First, all

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<sup>22</sup>*Ibid.*,



components mustered in Islam and Marxism is leaning (stiff-backed) one another. It is like a goods business where it can be added or decreased in a partial of component that can cause disrepair of the whole structure. Second; Islam and Marxism are ideology including life problem and man ideas. On the contrary, between Islam and Marxism also have conspicuous contradiction especially in the view of *Ke-tauhid-an* where Marx based on the philosophy of Marxism that man makes religion, and religion does not make man. Nevertheless, Islam believes the spiritual concept of the infinite where Islam describes man as soil; land; ground, or it can be said that religion (God) creates (makes) man, not man creates religion (God).

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