

Religion is Opium to Masses: Relevance in Current Times

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Abstract:

This delves into how the statement given by Karl Marx centuries ago is still relevant in the current world scenario. How it is pertinent when it comes to development in the 21st century. Opium is the drug that numbs all the parts of the body, makes you numb physically and then leaves your mind in a state where whatever said and done around you seems fine, and the most correct thing to one seems is to consume more of it. That is exactly what is the effect of Religion on us. We speak the language of it, we do what the preachers of that religion mention us what is the right thing to do, and are blind to other people under the same influence but from a different store i.e. different religion.

In the 21st century, the phrase "Religion is the opium of the masses," opined by Karl Marx, remains a provocative and widely debated statement. This assertion, suggesting that religion serves as a soothing but ultimately distracting force for the oppressed, invites us to examine its relevance in contemporary society. Alongside this, the paramount importance of the economy emerges as another critical force shaping human existence. Our actions, whether individual or collective, are fundamentally driven by the desire for a peaceful co-existence and survival. To facilitate this, humanity has framed a complex societal system.

Amartya Sen has observed that poverty extends beyond the mere lack of money; it encompasses the inability to realize one's full potential. This underscores the critical role of economic stability in ensuring overall well-being. Although it is scientifically established that a human can survive without food for 8-21 days, the collapse of the economy can lead to chaos and disruption in mere hours.

Mahatma Gandhi noted, "The world has enough for everyone's need, but not enough for everyone's greed," highlighting the delicate balance we strive to maintain within our economic structures. The fragility of these systems means that instability can quickly spiral into widespread distress.

In times of economic turmoil, society can devolve into a fierce struggle for resources, echoing Thomas Hobbes' depiction of life in a state of nature as "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short." Such crises often result in a desperate cry for help, with individuals and communities left to fend for themselves amidst the turmoil.

By juxtaposing Marx's view on religion with the essential role of economic stability in modern life, we can explore how both forces influence human behaviour and societal dynamics today. This essay will delve into the interplay between religion and the economy, assessing their combined impact on contemporary society and questioning whether Marx's analogy still holds true in our current times. With examples in Indian context and a few international ones. Along with its imprints in politics and economy as those are the very factor that get out world going.¹

Karl Marx was a German philosopher, humanist, economist and sociologist. And many of his theories are relevant and proven to be correct. So does his point of view on religion and its role. Although Marx didn't

have much of a say on the matter yet he said enough by stating- “Religion is Opium of the Masses”. But to understand what he could be trying to explain one has to put it in the context of the 19th century. Back then, in 19th century Europe, opium was actually considered to be a very positive drug having various 'good' uses for the people and was not seen through a narrow moralistic vision. People believed it to be an important medicine and was easily available in all pharmacies.¹

In the 21st century ‘Opium’ usually refers to a narcotic drug that creates dullness and slows down the body metabolism if injected or used for recreational purposes- usually in a negative shadow.

Marx used the term “Opium of the masses” to describe religion. According to him, religion is another ideology, and like others reflects the truth but here the truth is inverted.

Against the earlier prediction that the world is getting less religious, today's situation is that the counterpart is true; the world is becoming more religious than less. But when it comes to values or teachings, then the religions of the world differ significantly. “Religious distress is at the same time the expression of real distress and also 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 spiritless conditions. It is the opium of the people.” ~Karl Marx

Marx primarily believed that religion is an idea that was used by those in power to oppress the ones who felt affected. He mainly developed this theory while criticising Hegel’s Philosophy of Right.

Whenever people felt that there was something they needed or had to protest against, religion would explain it as “God is testing their patience” or “God will reward those who remain loyal to him and endure the pain without complaining” or the most famous one “ God gives his bravest soldier the hardest battle to fight”. Thus, there are very few left who will actually revolt, who can be taken care of. Hence, the mass revolution against the capitalist system won’t take place anytime soon. The exploitation will continue. This situation can be best explained with the metaphor that: “the elephant thinks it's powerless and bound to stay at any given location because of a rope that is tied to his leg, but all it will actually take is just a bit of pull and he’s free”, it’s all in the mind. what one believes they are capable of, it will be.²

From the above introduction we can understand how religion acts as an Opium drug that is given to them to slow them down from revolting and also helps the global leaders or people in position to exploit or convince people to act in a certain way or to accept policies that they possibly would not have in any other circumstances or with any other justification. Thus, if one wants to win over a large mass in their favour and prevent them from rising against them, they have to inject this drug- Religion.³

Politics:

- The most recent example, I would like to quote here, is the first order passed by the newly elected CM of Odisha to give entry access to all the devotees of Lord Jagannath in all the four gates of the temple instead of the only one gate which was prevailing since Covid outbreak. This decision had impact like opium which was evident from the mass rejoices and celebrations all around the state over this step. The repercussions lead to the sidelining of the actual problems of the state i.e. Affordable Housing and

¹ “Karl Marx on Religion – Marquette University Law School Faculty Blog,” June 8, 2017, <https://law.marquette.edu/facultyblog/2015/01/karl-marx-on-religion/comment-page-1/#comments>.

² Janani Mohan, “How Religion Causes Conflict,” *Medium* (blog), September 30, 2019, <https://medium.com/@justjanani/how-religion-causes-conflict-9c53cdf80471>.

³ Esther Oluffa Pedersen, “Religion Is the Opium of the People: An Investigation into the Intellectual Context of Marx’s Critique of Religion,” *History of Political Thought* 36, no. 2 (2015): 354–87.

Urban Poverty, Governance Deficit, etc. This lead to the **diversion from the socio-economic issues** at hand. Something that people demanded and expected from the new government.

- Some Christian evangelical groups which are influential in the dynamics of American politics, especially about conservative policies and politicians like Donald Trump. That said, attention has oftentimes been diverted from society in general to particular religious matters.⁴
- Shia Islam by the Iranian government to keep power in control and legitimacy of its political endeavours, for instance, quashing dissent.

Cultural Identity and Nationalism:

Religion gets attached to national identity and becomes polarized into an "us vs. them." This is the recipe for rallying a group mobilized by common fears against an outside enemy but often divorces them from their minorities and dissenters.⁵

Opium is a drug that slows down the functioning but one should understand the sensitivity of it; how, when toyed with it works in reverse and instead triggers extreme action and revolt (drug might have been injected as Opium instead does the work of Dopamine). An example of it would be:

Prime minister Modi's BJP led NDA attempted at enhancing their vote bank by constructing the humongous Ram mandir at Ayodhya. Though, the decision back fired and eventually did not yield result as per their plan. While they pleased one religion, they hurt another in the process. The poll results are a clear testimony to this.

Religion in Authoritarian Regimes

Authoritarian regimes use religion instead to bolster their regime and crush the opposition. In Iran, the intertwining of Shia Islam with that apparatus of state gave the government a readymade justification for its actions as well as a means to maintain control by which religious leaders are invested with great political power, so opposition is often cast in terms of heresy, thereby delegitimizing opposition and reducing resistance.

The identity of that state is closely linked to the narrow-minded Wahhabi Islam. This strict version of Islam is referred to justify social policies and a well-ordered society in place, despite the growling economic and social difficulties. It legitimates the monarchy but eschews democratic reform movements.⁶

China is a very interesting example, an officially atheistic state that nevertheless exploits religious practice for its interests. The Chinese Communist Party controls the religious organizations and makes sure that everything goes according to the plans of the government. Thus, the Chinese Patriotic Catholic Association, for instance, promotes only that kind of Catholicism that does not contradict the priorities of the Chinese state and even supports them. Religion is one of the elements helping to keep social harmony and prevent any potential risks for the regime. It provides a good example of how religion becomes what Marx described as 'the opium of the people'.

⁴ "Is Religion the Opium of the People?," *The Guardian*, June 29, 2009, sec. Opinion, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/belief/2009/jun/26/religion-philosophy>.

⁵ "Karl Marx's Opinion on Religion as Social Control | Britannica," accessed June 15, 2024, <https://www.britannica.com/video/186414/opposition-religion-Karl-Marx>.

⁶ "https://Archive.Krisis.Eu/Religion-as-the-Opium-of-the-People/," accessed June 15, 2024, <https://archive.krisis.eu/religion-as-the-opium-of-the-people/>.

Extremist Groups:

- **ISIS and Other Jihadist Groups:** A radical view of Islam is applied to justify violence and attract fracture individuals with a complaint besides religion on the social-economic plane as it gives them a sense of purpose and belonging.
- They adopt the same religious rhetoric to justify terrorism and violence, similar to the domestic extremist groups in the United States and Europe. These groups more often invoke actions as a defense of religious or cultural purity, exploiting the religious narrative to foster hatred and a division.

Religion and Education

Religious beliefs and institutions strongly inform educational content and policy in many nations. Even in the United States over the inclusion of creationism versus evolution in school curricula is a testament to this struggle between the influence of religious teaching and that of science.

In a country where religious cultures are paramount like Saudi Arabia or Pakistan, it is natural to have large doses of religious instruction in their school system and this in turn tends to mould the impressionable minds to fixed ideas of religious and political ideologies. In India today also, many schools are still supported by religious bodies like churches.⁷

Economic Policies and Social Programs

Specific to the Indian Economy, Religion while acting as a great booster through tourism for pilgrim places, it has had many negative effects too which has forced many to question if it is acting as Opium to the Indian system? Some being-

- **Subsidies and Funding:** Large expenditure of money is invested by the Indian government in religious activities and two main ways. First, it provides subsidies for Haj pilgrimage; second, fund allocation is done for maintenance and other works of temples, religious places, and so on. These can be used in more economic viable areas like poverty reduction and infrastructure development.
- **Policy Bias:** Religious influence can lead to policy biases in favour of groups that create economic inefficiency and social tension. For example, Banning of hijab in Karnataka, policies that fund religious school education over secular education result in limited development of workers for the modern economy.

Communal Violence and Economic Disruption

1. **Property Damage and Loss of Life:** Communal riots more often than not result in the destruction of property, businesses, and infrastructures. Like in the case of the 2002 Gujarat riots that caused massive destruction to businesses and properties, leading to huge economic losses.
2. **Investor Confidence:** It has the effect of undermining investor confidence, both domestic and international. Investors wish to invest where there is stability, and recurring religious tensions make the regions less attractive for investment. This leads to a decline in economic growth and job opportunities.

⁷ Yida Zhai, "Is Religion the 'Opiate of the Masses'? Religion and Political Trust in China," *Current Sociology* 71, no. 5 (September 1, 2023): 808–29, <https://doi.org/10.1177/00113921211048527>.

Pilgrimages and Economic Drain

While religious tourism boosts local economies, the large-scale pilgrimages also are a stress on the local resources and infrastructure. Millions of pilgrims to Varanasi, Amritsar, or Kumbh Mela stretch the means in the local infrastructure of the destinations and dilute the services offered. Besides, besides the cost of management that is often borne by the local governments, along with the cost of management, millions of funds are diverted from other vital services.

Global Interfaith Dialogue and Diplomacy

Religion is exploited for global interfaith dialogue and diplomacy despite its potential to be used for manipulative purposes. Interfaith, in the effort to create a bridge between the different religious communities, seeks answers to the solution of peace and understanding among people. Organizations like the United Religions Initiative or the Parliament of the World's Religions work towards these goals and show that religion may really turn out to be a powerful force for global unity and cooperation.⁸

This investment and activity, however, point to the counterbalancing possibilities of religion as a tool to forge avenues in the path of reconciliation and peacebuilding, particularly in countries emerging from conflict, where religious leaders have repeatedly engaged in providing mediation between warring sides and supplying dialogue tracks, only underscoring the duality of religion's role as opiate and instrument of positive social transformation.

Religious leaders:

In the early 2010s, India witnessed the emergence of many self-proclaimed religious *gurus* like 'Asharam Babu', 'Sarthi baba', etc, who have controlled masses and have taken unfair advantage of their faith and belief. The actual problem amplifying the moment started consuming their content and increasing their reach further. The innocence of people is placed in wrong hands, crushed by the ones who were supposed to keep them safe- making them aware of the word unknown and issue at hand. The pillar of democracy instead proves that it is no longer able to carry the burden. With that being said, it is not that every one of them is on the government's payroll or solely speaking about religion, but enough to poison the pond. Thanks to the advancing technology that there are various other outlets through which one can access events round the globe.

Another outlook:

This side shows how religion can be used to not only exploit society but also to alienate them. When the phrase 'Opium to masses' is used to explain the effect that it has on people; As humans also have a gut-wrenching pattern of killing their fellow mates on the basis of religion.⁹

In these contemporary times we should also not see religion in a negative limelight as a political ideology that supports the right-wing agenda. As Marx had also mentioned: "It is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of our soulless conditions", we can understand- the folk religion, is directly linked to average people's struggle, aspiration and sorrow. It creates faith in social life and gives solace in times of crisis. The teachings in scriptures have prevented man from doing many crimes, it gives

⁸ "Is Religion the Opium of the People?"

⁹ Dare Ojo Omonijo et al., "Religion as the Opium of the Masses: A Study of the Contemporary Relevance of Karl Marx," *Asian Research Journal of Arts & Social Sciences* 1 (October 1, 2016): 1–7, <https://doi.org/10.9734/ARJASS/2016/28326>.

them a moral compass, a sense of what is wrong even when legal. What one should keep at the base is not to use it as an excuse that will weaken them further for their own good.

It is used as a Tool for Social Stability- by providing a sense of community and belonging. During the COVID-19 pandemic, religious leaders in various countries played a crucial role in promoting public health measures. By endorsing vaccination and other preventive measures, they helped to foster compliance and reduce resistance, illustrating how religion can be a force for social good.

Many countries such as ancient Rome- had a church from where the Pope used to give orders and control a large section of Europe.

Thus, in conclusion, Karl Marx's assertion that "religion is the opium of the masses" is hugely applicable today and explains how the role of religion in contemporary society is multidimensional and controversial. On the one hand, religion remains a component of political manipulation, social control, and extremism, on the other acts as the only thread of hope they can hold onto. However, it has visibly significant roles in media, education, economic policies, and even worldwide diplomacy today. A critical review of these various roles really helps in understanding Marx's critique about the concept of religion in today's world as being totally relevant and really nuanced in its presence. Like opium, religion, too, can mollify and pacify, but it will equally ensure deep transformation and elevation of humanity to a next higher level of existence.