



The founding of Marxist study of religion and its theoretical sources of humanities



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Marx and Engels have elaborated the new system of their thought in *German Ideology*, including some important ideas on religion, from 1845 to 1846. Engels firstly applied the newly founded worldview and methodology to the systematic study of religion in his monograph *Peasant War in Germany* in 1850. Both events marked the founding of the Marxist Study of Religion. The Marxist humanity theory of religion benefitted from the religious critiques of Neo-Hegelian, Feuerbachian and religious philosophy. The social theoretical sources of Marxism on religion are supposed to be the topics of other articles.

Contribution: The general view in Chinese academia has been that the study of religion in the West was founded by Friedrich Max Müller in 1873 when he coined a new terminology 'Science of Religion' for his book. Comparatively speaking, the classic Marxist writers had only 'a view of religion' and not a view of 'the study of religion'. The authors argued that there is a systematic study of religion from the very beginning of Marxism. Marx and Engels constructed the humanity theory of the Marxist Study of Religion by adopting and developing religious critique of Neo-Hegelian, Feuerbachian, critical theological thought. The academics in Western countries do not have such kind of views and this resulted in limited contributions in this area.

Keywords: Marxist Study of Religion; Karl Marx; Fredrick Engels; Neo-Hegelians; Ludwig von Feuerbach; theological proofs of God; essence of religion; root of religion.

Introduction

The general view in Chinese academia has been that the classic Marxist writers had only 'a view of religion' and not a view of 'the study of religion', the difference between the two being that the former was a subordinate and fragmentary theory and understanding, while the latter is an independent and systematic discipline of knowledge. Furthermore, they generally regard that Friedrich Max Müller's (1823–1900) four lectures collected and published in 1873 and delivered in England 3 years before and published as a book entitled *An Introduction to the Science of Religion*¹ is marked as the founding of the study of religion, because he coined the name of the discipline. The conception of both the Scientific Study of Religion and Religious Studies used nowadays in the academic circle in China is different from the so-called 'Science of Religion' by Friedrich Max Müller. However, the German edition of the book was later renamed *Comparative Religion* perhaps because after he had introduced his earlier terminology he had been questioned. There is actually not any academic discipline that is named 'the Science of Religion' in the world today; it has been abandoned already. The origin of the study of religion in the modern academic sense is much earlier than the initiation of Comparative Religion.

Currently, the study of religion in China has become a comprehensive discipline spanning the humanities and social sciences, and the sub-discipline with the greatest number of professionals and the most fruitful results is the study of the history of religions (including religious thought). Therefore, the sorting out of the history of the study of religion under our academic discourse system should focus more on the historiography of religions in line with modern academic norms.

Marx and Engels founded the Marxist study of religion on the basis of the accumulation of modern European scholarship

As early as 1695, William Turner's (1653–1701) *The History of all Religions in the World*, published in London, drew a map of religions that identified four major categories of religions: Christianity,

1. See Friedrich Max Müller (1873).

Note: Hangzhou City University Section: Cross-cultural Religious Studies, sub-edited by Chen Yuehua and Ishraq Ali (Hangzhou City University, China).

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Mohammedanism, heathenism and idolatry. Although the name 'heathenism' is still rife with theological prejudice, this book opened up the origins of the study of religion. The book shows that European ideas about heathenism were still rather vague at that time. The Eastern religions in the generic term 'heathenism' were not categorised into various labels until the 19th century, when Buddhism appeared in European literature for the first time in 1801, Hinduism in 1829 and Confucianism in 1862 (Masuzawa 2005). It shows that the modern study of religion did not appear suddenly in Europe, but that its formation took more than 100 years to take shape and come to maturity in the first half of the 19th century.

Scholars such as Max Muller, Tylor, Frazer and Maret in Britain all began to focus on the origin of religion in primitive times and its subsequent historical development, which made religious anthropology flourish as an early form of comparative religion. J.G. Frazer (1854–1941) proposed in his famous work *The Golden Bough: A Study in Witchcraft and Religion*²; that the origin of religion is witchcraft and religion evolved from witchcraft.

In addition to Oriental Studies such as Egyptology, Hinduism and Sinology, the greater impact was on the study of the history of Christianity in Europe, which freed itself from the shackles of Apologetics and adopted a scientific research paradigm. Representative figures include Bruno Bauer (1809–1882) and David Friedrich Strauss (1808–1874), representatives of the Young Hegelians and the French scholar Joseph Ernest Renan (1823–1892). Their academic achievements had a significant influence on Marx and Engels. In 1841–1843, the German historian Wilhelm Zimmermann (1807–1878) published *The History of the Great Peasant War*. In 1850, Engels used a significant amount of well-documented historical material in this great work to write the glorious work *The Peasant War in Germany* (Engels n.d.). In this study, Engels applies the new worldview and methodology discovered by Marx and himself together, especially the method of class analysis, which they completed 5 years before in *The German Ideology*, to the study of the history of the Reformation movement in Germany. This work sets an example of the Marxist theory of religious history. Hence, we have good reason to claim that 1850 was the first year of the Marxist study of religion.

Marx and Engels were deeply influenced by the European Enlightenment thought, and their religious views were freed from religious prejudice by bidding farewell to theism through the Young Hegelians and Ludwig von Feuerbach (1804–1872) jumped out of Eurocentrism through utopian socialism. This facilitated the more thorough implementation of the scientific method into all aspects of the creative process of their thoughts. Their vision in the field of religion, although still focused on Christianity, also dabbled in primitive religion (represented by Marx's anthropological notes in his later years) and Eastern religions (such as Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism). Marx has made an extensive critique of the philosophy of religion and has had specialised

2. See James George Frazer (2009).

writings in religious art. In addition to *The Peasant War in Germany*, Engels authored three articles on primitive Christianity in his later years. Engels systematically expounded the nature, origin, history, types, roots, roles and attitudes and policies towards religion in works such as *Anti-Dühring* and *Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy*.

The theoretical sources of the Marxist study of religion are the religious views of the Young Hegelians and Feuerbach; European Christian historiography, the philosophy of religion and early anthropology are the direct theoretical sources of Marxist study of religion. This article is focused on the former four, and the last one which is the on social theory of religion is a result of the topics of other articles.

The young Hegelians' critical thought on religion

Marx and Engels were both born into religious families, but they joined the intellectual movement as adults, influenced by the Young Hegelians, especially the writings of Bruno Bauer and David Friedrich Strauss on biblical exegesis, and thus abandoned their religious beliefs and moved towards atheism.

In terms of scholarly contributions, Bruno Bauer and David Strauss made use of early European mythology, and linguistics to study the history of primitive Christianity and hence are merited as being groundbreaking. Their contributions are therefore indelible not only in intellectual history but also in the history of the study of religion. In 1835, Strauss published *The Life of Jesus*, providing a historicist and scientific critique of the Gospels, noting that during the translation process, the translators modified and abridged the original text. The intrinsic connection of the three synoptic gospels does not depend on the accounts of the time, but on the adaptations made by people in later periods to the needs of their era. As for the Gospel of John, its authenticity is even more unverifiable than that of the first three Gospels. More importantly, the Gospel of John is filled with 2nd-century Greek philosophical thought, and thus, there is good reason to suspect that 'it is entirely possible that this is a philosophical, conscious, fictional mixture (Strauss 1981:116)'. The analysis by Strauss of the large number of supernatural miracles in the Gospels is consistent with the slightly earlier European mythologist Karl Otfried Müller's opinion (1797–1840) whose basic view was that myth is a combination of the real and the ideal, and that in order to explain the myth of a nation at a certain time, it is necessary to have a good understanding of the psychological state of that nation at that time (Jin 2005:63–64).

Marx worked closely with Bauer, whose doctoral dissertation had 'self-consciousness' as a central conception.

Bauer not only strenuously opposes Strauss's 'entity' critique principle and mystical critical tools, but also uses 'self-consciousness' to make it possible for Hegel's philosophical

system of thought to develop a critique of Christianity in terms of the 'subject'. (Shu 2014:147)

Engels was fascinated by Strauss's *The Life of Jesus*, saying that even though there may be errors in the historical evidence, the book uses mythology to examine the gospels, suggesting that the gospels are a reflection of the Absolute Spirit externalised as the 'spiritual entity' in that era among the masses, the collective consciousness and 'universal belief' of the believers. Strauss, in terms of collective consciousness, and Bauer, in terms of individual consciousness, applied the absolute spirit of Hegelian objective idealism to the subjective idealist critique of religion, which was clearly more suited to the bourgeois revolutionary-democratic critique of the Prussian realpolitik system, which had religion as its ideology.

Feuerbach's humanistic philosophy

In 1841, Feuerbach published *The Essence of Christianity*, which caused great repercussions among young German intellectuals, 'everyone was excited at that time: we all became Feuerbachian for a moment (Marx 2009:275)'. Marx and Engels took the path of materialism in philosophy through the influence of Feuerbach, and their view of religion also moved from the subjective idealism of the young Hegelians to realist humanism, and their theory of illusory reflection on the essence of religion, the alienation theory of religious roots and the theory of commodity fetishism all benefitted from this, laying the foundation for the historical materialist view of religion.

Feuerbach's idea of religion as the alienation of man's being (in German: *Gattungswesen*) greatly influenced the Marxist theory of religion. Feuerbach argued that religion is not the product of deliberate rational human thought, but originates from man's irrational imagination, the result of association, fantasy and distortion, and Feuerbach proposed that:

God is pure, absolute, and free from all natural boundaries of personhood/humanity. God is what the human individual merely ought to be and will be. Therefore, faith in God is man's faith in the infinity and truth of his own nature. The divine nature is human nature, and it is the subjective human nature in its absolute freedom and infinity. (Feuerbach 1984:222)

Feuerbach proposed the 'Gattung' (genus) way of life as a relationship of dependence among human beings, distinguishing them from animals. He believes that the nature of the genus includes nature, but more importantly the spiritual connection represented by reason, emotion (love), will, etc. In doing so, he goes beyond Bauer and Strauss in seeing religion only as a product of the spirit. Marx and Engels adopted this view and also considered religious consciousness to be a fantasy, an upside-down reflection and an alienation of the nature of man. However, Marx and Engels did not remain in Feuerbach's thought, they went deeper into the root of this 'alienation'. For Engels, although religion came from the very beginning from the subjective fantasy of people, from natural, everyday experience, its

emergence and development were closely linked to the growth of society. Engels pointed out:

In addition to natural forces, social forces also play a role, forces which, like natural forces themselves, are alien to man and initially inexplicable. It governs man with the same apparently natural necessity. (Feuerbach 1984:222)

In this situation, the oppressed:

[D]espairing of material liberation, go after spiritual liberation instead, seek the consolation of the mind to escape from a situation of utter despair. (Marx & Engels 1963:334)

Marx and Engels proposed that the core element determining the nature of the genus is the real social relations, especially property relations which are the fundamental factor, while emotion, will and reason are only secondary subordinate relations. The limitations of the individual and the perfection of God in Feuerbach's humanistic philosophy exactly correspond to the inverse of a binary relation between the limitations of reality and the consciousness of perfect religion in the Marxist study of religion.

Marx clearly stated in his *Introduction to Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law* in late 1843–early 1844:

Man is no abstract being encamped outside the world. Man is the world of man, the state, society. This state, this society, produce religion, an inverted world-consciousness, because they are an inverted world. (Marx 1859:n.p.)

Later, in the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, Marx began to turn his attention to the study of the alienation of labour, considering human beings not as the bearers of consciousness, but as 'human beings' of sensual existence. The greatest difference between humans and animals is not that they have reason, emotion (love), will, etc., as Feuerbach suggested, but that they can use the tools of labour and carry out practical activities. Through practical activity, human beings reflect the 'human essence' of the subject in the objective activity of the object, and through the change of the object. When the subject appropriates the use value of the object, this process of practical labour is the process of free and conscious activity. On the contrary, when the means of production are owned by the capitalist, and the subject of labour does not work for the purpose of possessing the value in use, but for the purpose of exchanging the labour for the means of subsistence possessed by the capitalist, then what the subject does is not a free and conscious activity, but an 'alienated labour', and the practical activity carried out by humans at this time is not according to their own will, but according to the will of the capitalist or the demand of the market, which does not reflect the human essence. When the subject of labour is alienated from its essence as a human being, that is 'self-alienation of man'. If the self-alienation of man is to be eliminated, and man is to fully possess the essence of human and realise free and conscious activity, private ownership must be eliminated. Only in this way can people truly achieve freedom and no longer treat religion as an 'opium' of the mind, but as a 'faith' from the heart. Nonetheless, Marx and Engels opposed the so-called

Christian socialism and advocated that religious faith should be left as a private matter for individual citizens.

19th century religious history and orientalism

Engels maintained a high level of interest in the history of Christianity and, in addition to studying the writings of David Strauss and Bruno Bauer, studied Schelling's (1775–1854) lectures on the philosophy of revelation and Ferdinand Benary's (1805–1880) lectures on the Book of Revelation while serving in the military in Berlin in 1841–1842. Another author often cited in Engels' treatise is the French Semitic linguist, historian of religion and positivist philosopher Joseph Ernest Renan. Renan is known worldwide for his work on the history of early Christianity, *The History of the Origins of Christianity* (8 volumes, published in Paris 1863–1883 and translated into many languages). He was one of the early pioneers of orientalism in Europe, with works such as *Averroès et l'averroïsme*, *The General History and Comparative System of the Semitic Languages* (Awarded the Volney Prize of the French Academy of Sciences in 1847) and *History of the people of Israel*. He also influenced Engels in Semitic and the history of the Jewish people, and as Engels said, he quoted Renan more often because Renan was popular with his readers. Engels, however, had no problem pointing out some of Renan's shortcomings. In 1873, after the publication of Renan's *The Antichrist*, Engels published a very brief book review in *Kohren Daily News*, pointing out that Renan's testimony about 666 or 616 = Emperor Nero, thus presuming the appearance of the Revelation to the exact month, was a testimony he had heard as early as in Benary's lectures, although Benary made a point of stating that he was only quoting from his German predecessors:

[W]hereas Mr. Renan in this book, as on other occasions, appropriates uncritically to himself the achievements from the long development of German science. (Marx 1985:170)

Engels refers to Renan as a 'copyist'.

Engels critiqued earlier research findings in the history of European religions, noting that the development of Christianity made possible the formation of world religions. Initially, influenced by traditional religious concepts, national religions with their own distinctive gods sheltering them and were developed only among ethnic groups related by descent. At that time, if the ethnic group died out from war and other reasons, its national gods would disappear as well. But when the Roman Empire became dominant, it not only believed in its own gods, but also recognised the gods of foreigners, and the Christianity of the New Testament was based on the doctrine of 'love', not only for oneself, but also for one's enemies, and the people who believed in Christianity, regardless of race, would be sheltered. Christianity catered to the needs of both the rulers and the ruled, and by extension became the state religion of the Roman Empire. Christianity grew and improved with the feudal system in Europe, and developed into a world religion that was compatible with the

feudal system of the time. With the improvement of social productivity and the development of the human rational enlightenment, the first shot in the war between the emerging citizens and the feudal aristocracy was the 'Reformation'. As a result of Martin Luther's translation of the Bible, the peasants used Martin Luther's translation of the Bible as a weapon to rebel against the church, leading to a vigorous 'Reformation' movement throughout the German nation, and thus to the advancement of society and the rise of the bourgeoisie. In *The Peasant War in Germany* (Engels n.d.), Engels analysed the relationship between the Reformation and social revolution, saying that the interests and struggles of all classes were concealed under the cloak of the Reformation and the 'unification of the state and the church' at the time. Religion seems to be a heavenly thing, but in fact it reflects all earthly issues, and the problems associated with religion have not been on the other (heavenly) side, but on this side.

Marx had written two commentaries on British rule in India, which dealt with many aspects of Indian religion, and he drew his knowledge from the writings of the European Sanskrit scholars of the time, such as Max Müller's translation and publication of a six-volume collection of classical Indian texts, *The Hymns of the Rig Veda*, and his intercultural theology. However, Marx and Engels went further in their study of the substance of religion, by linking religion to real life and using dialectical thinking to move from the surface to the inside. What makes the Marxist study of religion so different from Müller's study of religion is that the aims of their studies and their research methodologies differ: according to Müller, the study of religion is about the regularity of religion in the course of human history; the methodology of the study of religion is to achieve the examination and critique of religion by comparing the different forms of different religions. Marx and Engels, on the other hand, believed that the study of religion must be the same as the study of social history, which means that the various conditions under which religion exists must be studied.

Western critical theological thought

The influence of religion on Marx and Engels did not just occur in the early stages of their lives when they had theistic belief, but the reflection and criticism of religious theological discourse were reflected throughout their life framework, ideological framework and political life. They began their journey of the creation of thought with the religious critique, and in this sense Marxism is a secondary discard of the Western theological critique, which laid the foundation for the critique of the Marxist philosophy of religion. As Marx pointed out in the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*:

Communism begins from the outset with atheism; but atheism is at first far from being communism; that atheism is still mostly an abstraction. The philanthropy of atheism is therefore at first only philosophical, abstract philanthropy, and that of communism is at once real and directly bent on action. (Marx 2009:186)

Communism is the position as the negation of the negation, and is hence the actual phase necessary for the next stage of historical

development in the process of human emancipation and rehabilitation. (Marx 2009:197)

Marx and Engels sublimated theological theistic proofs, such as ontological proofs, cosmological proofs, moral proofs and teleological proofs, by exposing their realistic social functions in the political-economic critique and political struggle.

For example, Kant famously criticised ontological proofs, arguing that 'presence' is not the 'real property' of a concept but only its logical property, and therefore the presence of God cannot be deduced from the concept of God's perfection. Kant uses the analogy of a silver coin thaler to argue that the reality of 100 thalers contains more possibilities than the mere concept of thalers, so a businessman cannot simply add a couple of 0s to 100 thalers to increase his wealth. This is certainly profound and vivid. The ontological critique was discussed by Marx in his doctoral dissertation and by Engels in his *Anti-Dühring* and other works. Marx directly points out that ontological proofs are logically nothing more than a tautology. Marx further points out the inadequacy of Kant's ontological proof, noting that the mere possibility of the group repeatedly conceiving of 100 thalers is not equivalent to total nothingness. Marx criticises Kant by saying, 'The example given by Kant would rather strengthen the ontological proof. The real thaler has the same existence as the imaginary gods'.

The ontological proof is nothing else but 'What I realistically (really) imagine is for me the appearance of reality', which acts on me, in the sense that all gods, whether pagan or Christian, once had a real existence. (Marx 2001:100–101)

This existence is, of course, not in the physical sense, but in the economic and sociological sense, a 'social reality' constructed by collective intentions. This insight mirrors the perception of the nature of money in Marx's later lifelong study of political economy, which inspired the former.

Theological moral proofs, which Kant had systematised, argued that only the recognition of the presence of God could guarantee the validity of the moral law. Marx's high school thesis reveals his acceptance of the Christian moral argument, but in an appendix to his doctoral dissertation he excerpts a critique of moralistic proofs from Heinrich's (1723–1789) book *The System of Nature*:

Nothing then was more dangerous than to persuade him there existed a being superior to nature, before whom reason must remain silent; to whom, to be happy hereafter, he must sacrifice everything here. (Marx 2001:98)

In 1844, Marx and Engels criticised the 'theological morals' reflected in the novel *The Mysteries of Paris* in the *The Holy Family*, pointing out that the so-called voluntary religious morality actually requires coercion through secular punishment in order to achieve it. In 1847, in his article *The Communism of the 'Rhineland Observers'*, (*Deutsche-Brüsseler-Zeitung*) Marx further poked at the crux of the

moral argument for so-called 'theocracy': 'The social principles of Christianity are sneaking and hypocritical, and the proletariat is revolutionary (Marx 1985:218)'. Later in life, in his *The Critique of the Gotha Programme*, Marx called on the Workers' Party to work to free 'freedom of conscience' from the 'sorcery' (entanglement) of religion.

Conclusion

In summary, Marx and Engels deserve the initial credit for the theory (principles) of the Marxist study of religion, Marxist historiography of religion, Marxist anthropology of religion, Marxist philosophy of religion and Marxist governance of religion. The positions, views and methodologies of Marx and Engels on the origin, are consistent and still widely endorsed in China, which laid the foundation of the Marxist study of religion. At the same time, they each had their own focus because of their different divisions of work and interests. Marx had more to say about the relationship between religion and politics and economics, about the philosophy of religion and about Eastern religions. Engels gave a systematic exposition of the theory of the study of religion, and published special treatises on the history of Christianity. In addition to this, Marx and Engels' discourse deals with the interdisciplinary aspects of religion and science, religion and art and religion and literature. Marx and Engels may not have directly addressed many of the issues we study today, but their ideas in terms of positions, views and methodologies can serve as basic guidance for constructing and reconstructing the Marxist study of religion.

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This research is entirely carried out by Z.C. and Z.X. C.Z. formulated the outline and major viewpoints, X.Z. helped to look up information and materials.

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