

Communism Islam series

MARX READS ISLAM
VIEWS OF KARL MARX AND ENGELS ON CHRISTIANITY AND
ISLAM

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The statements made by Karl Marx on Islam and Muslims had not been compiled. It may be because of this reason that many people wrote that Marx had not said anything about this religion. In his reviews religion was not at all a subject of importance and hence he did not make further references to it. It is seen that Marx and Engels adopted the stand of praising religion whenever it stood against imperialism and attacking religion whenever it supported imperialism. Marx had been opposing the attitude shown by the Christian clergy of the period towards the socialist society advocated by him. In his early days he held that apostles of religions were conferring their bliss and peace to others and because of that reason religion was acting just as a pain killer (Opium), instead of solving real problems. This Marxian analysis had been misinterpreted by many people by giving the meaning of “illegal psychotropic drugs” to the word opium. During that time the custom of giving opium as pain killer was prevalent among Jew – Christian priest hood. Marx used that word to imply that, that was not the right solution. Church was collaborating with the capitalists, was cheating the poor people and was forcing extortion on them. “Instead of finding solutions to one’s own problems oneself, leaving those problems to others to solve and bearing miseries without complaints are going on in the name of religion and that results in exploitation”, Marx stated. On the other hand he not only did not question the stand of religion, but also adopted the view of supporting them whenever they stood against capitalists. He did not discuss anything more about religion either, because his focus was not religion. He firmly opposed the stand of the clergy that for all sufferings there will be rewards in the afterlife and hence all hardships in this world should be borne naturally. This stand is to help the capitalists. Man has to prepare himself ready to remove his sufferings. Marx believes that under capitalists, religion is a pain killer and it is not possible to gain permanent results by treating with such temporary medication. Marx does not approve illusions in the name of religion. That may alienate people from reality. But he does not set aside the importance of religion either: "Religious suffering is, at one and the same time, the expression of real suffering and a protest against real suffering. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium (Pain Killer) of the people".¹ Though religion is all this, Marx says that it is now a pain killer to escape the awareness of the worldly sufferings. By concealing the full lines of the statement the opponents of Marxian views tried to make believe the believers that Marx is totally opposed to religion. Marx does not approve the attitude of clergy who undermining the realities promise paradise to the poor and asking them to suffer exploitation on behalf of such false consolations. Marx does not approve of the spirituality of thoughts as Hegel did, instead he describes thoughts as reflections of physical issues.

“The abolition of religion as the illusory happiness of the people is the demand for their real happiness. To call on them to give up their illusions about their condition is to call on them to give up a condition that requires illusions. The criticism of religion is, therefore, in embryo, the criticism of that value of tears of which religion is the halo.”² At the same time Marx does not negate the essence of religions. “The objective essence of religion, particularly the Christian religion, is nothing but the essence of human, and particularly Christian feeling, the secret of theology therefore is anthropology”.³ Marx believes that religion, family, state, law, morality, art; all are human productions. “Man makes religion, religion does not make man. Religion is indeed man's self-consciousness and self-awareness so long as he has not found himself or has already lost himself again. But, man is no abstract being squatting outside the world. Man is the world of man – state, society. This state and this society produce religion, which is an inverted consciousness of the world, because they are inverted world. Religion is the general theory of this world, its encyclopaedic compendium, its logic in popular form, its spiritual point d'honneur, its enthusiasm, its moral sanction, its solemn complement, and its universal basis of consolation and justification. It is the fantastic realization of the human essence since the human essence has not acquired any true reality”.⁴ Marx also illustrates a real world like religions do! He believes struggle is essential here to acquire that real world. He said that the indirect objective of opposing religion is opposing spirituality which is making people lazy. The clergy really were binding the people on negative spirituality and were making them lazy. Like Marx, Islam also had vehemently opposed this pseudo spirituality of the clergy citing the very same reason. Quran says: “Most of the clergy belonging to Jews and Christians eat the wealth of the people illegally. They hoard gold and silver and do not spend them on the path of God. Surely painful punishments are awaiting them.”⁵ Later a section of Muslims also turned to priesthood and began to help capitalists. From the statements of Marx it is understood that he opposes only the part of the priesthood and spirituality which support the capitalists. The essence of Marxian opposition to priesthood is that it pushes the working people in to the bondage of the capitalists. At the same time the scriptures and prophets stood for the emancipation of the marginalized and working class. The clergy reverted the religion making it a tool in the hands of the capitalists and exploiters.

In the early stages, Marx did not elaborate on religion. At the same time his collaborator Engels gave narrations on Christianity and Islam. Engels says Christianity basically is a religion which works for the uplift of the poor people. “The history of early Christianity has notable points of resemblance with the modern working-class movement. Like the latter, Christianity was originally a movement of oppressed people: it first appeared as the religion of slaves and emancipated slaves, of poor people deprived of all rights, of peoples subjugated or dispersed by Rome. Both Christianity and the socialists stand for the salvation from bondage and misery; Christianity places this salvation in a life beyond, after death, in heaven; socialism places it in this world, by transformation of the society. Both were subjected to persecution and baited, their adherents were despised and made the objects of exclusive laws, the former as enemies of the human race, the latter as enemies of the state, enemies of religion, the family, social order.”⁶ Engels also wrote that in the early Christianity the archetype of initial Socialism can be seen. The followers of Christianity in the beginning stages were the oppressed and neglected masses. Jesus asked to protect the poor people. But Roman Church worked with the suppressing rulers. For centuries it helped the system of slavery. In the medieval period Catholic Church spoke of heaven. But it amassed boundless wealth too. Martin Luther declared that each individual has the

right to interpret the Bible. But, instead of supporting the fighting farmers he supported the powerful kings. Basically religion is a social establishment having its base on the social and economical realities of the society. The world of religion is the reflection of the real world. Engels, thus, shares his view on religion.

Marx, while pointing to the problems encountered by the Jews of Germany, said that all religions should fight against their religion's political supremacy. "It is only when religion is excluded from public laws and personalized, and then only the religious person escapes from the politics of religion. Religion and its laws are becoming puppets in the hands of Catholic Church. The human base of Christianity is to be sustained." Marx reaches at the opinion that religion is the embodiment of principle of human development. The clergy made hue and cry "Marxism annihilates religions", when they found out that their supremacy was being questioned by Marxism. At the same time rationalists and atheists propagandized that Marx's aim is to destroy religions and used Marxian ideals to spread their own ideology of atheism. Engels says: "Socialists of some European countries say that believing in God is against socialism. But belief in Virgin Mary is different. Each gentle socialist will believe in Her".⁷ Engels who advocates differentiating Church from state says that "it is not necessary to discard religious societies from running schools using their own funds and from teaching all their 'nonsense' there".⁸

It is unscientific to make an analysis by placing religion on one side and communism on the other side. Like differentiations between religion and Communism, there are dialectical philosophical differentiations among religions also. While Hindu religion believes in multiple Gods Islam which believes in only one God adopts a completely contradictory stand. So, all religions are to be considered as different social sciences. Each one has its own way but unites in for the emancipation of the poor. Hinduism believing in many gods, Christianity believing in Trinity, Islam believing in one god and Communism believing no god aims at the emancipation of have notes. So there is no need to put religions in one group and Communism in the other. Engels observes: "Anyhow all religions are amazing reflections made on human minds by the physical forces which control the day to day life of human beings. In such reflections physical forces took the manifestation of metaphysical forces. In the early historical times natural powers were reflected like this. These in later transitional periods started different and multi polar personifications in different peoples".⁹ When social forces tried to encounter Human beings these amazing religious symbols became spiritual forces of nature as well as the representatives of history. Later these spiritual forces transformed themselves into one God. This one God is the reflection of consolidated Human being. Engels has upheld the view that Christianity and Islam gave religious spirit to historical movements.¹⁰

Marx found out that Hindu religion in India was doing the same as Christianity in Europe who sung accolades to capitalism. "This country is showing its regression by detrimentally worshipping natural forces. The Human being, who is the master of nature, worshipfully bends his knees before Monkey God (Hanuman) and Cow Goddess (Kamadhenu)".¹¹ When religions lead revolutions Marx and Engels recognizes them; they reject the religion, only when it is exploited by the clergy to push the working class to the enslavement of the capitalists. On the role taken by religious establishments in the struggles by farmers of medieval Germany Engels says: "Putting Bible against reason is equal to killing the meaning with words. The Holy Spirit mentioned in Bible is not one which resides outside us. The Holy Spirit is our rationale. Belief is

nothing other than the enlivening rationale in human beings.....Paradise is not another world. It has to be found in this life. To construct Paradise on this earth and to establish the Kingdom of God is the duty of the believers”¹²

ISLAM

Marx and Engels consider Islam not just as a religion but as an organization for struggle. Engels tried to study Islam using the fundamental documents. For this purpose he studied Persian and Arabic.¹³ Engels collected documents related to Islam and Muslims and handed over them to Marx. In the initial stages Marx excavated information about Islam from the books of Bernier and Raffles. After 1850 he tried to know more about Russia and Ottoman Caliph. The Crimean war induced Marx to know more about Islam. (Letters written to Engels,10/03/1853). Marx introduced Ottoman Turkey as the region for revolution and Russia and Europe as the Centres for making the revolution possible. Letters written by Marx’s wife show that in the 1870’s he was immersed in studies on eastern problems. “My husband is now completely immersed in eastern problems. The honourable and steady attacks made by sons of Mohammed on all the deceitful and violent Christians (the emperor, Tsar and his followers) make him very happy.”¹⁴ Marx aggressively condemns Tsarist Russia and its lien on Constantinople, the capital of Ottoman empire. Marx forcefully criticises the pro Tsarist parliament and press of Britain which supports Russia by introducing Ottoman Caliph as sick and that country as weak.¹⁵ Marx declares that the secret plans by England and the Tsar to attack Turkey is quite treacherous. “Turkey, the weak state has shown courage and decency than their allies France and England. Turkey has become highly successful in unearthing opportunities hidden by these ally countries. They have written off the demands of Russia, their hereditary enemy. This is not through falsehood instead it is through invaluable sincerity and decency”.¹⁶

While criticising the eastern countries on their colonialism, Marx sometimes praised the civilizing mission of the usurping countries at times. At the same time with regard to Ottoman Empire he termed it an extreme deception. Marx strongly criticises the British for taking control of Herat under the garb of protecting Afghanistan and inflicting cruelties on Ionian region of Greece by beating up women and children and inflicting upon them brutalities. Marx blames that British, under the pretext of preventing the influence of Russia and Austria, is trying to take over Ottoman kingdom.¹⁷ Marx does not approve the deeds of the Tsar in any way. Whenever Tsar tries to make treaty with Ottoman Sultan, Marx describes the venture as treachery of Russia. In his articles Marx calls the Tsar Emperor a false believer, bear, man eater etc. He accused nationalism brought about by certain countries under the Tsar Emperors as total foolishness. He described Russian Nationalism as a copy of feudalism. In the 1850’s Karl Marx was taking a firm stand in favour of the Sultan. Also, he strongly accuses the imperial forces making treaties against the Sultan.¹⁸ While criticising the imperial forces Marx upholds the stand taken by Arabs and Afghanistan. He shares, in his articles, his anguish with Christianity over the association between the clergy and imperialism.

The British planned to attack the Sultan under the pretext of helping the Christians in the Ottoman Kingdom. But Marx reiterates that Christians do not have hostility with Sultan and were safe under him. As a proof Marx quotes the proclamation of the Christian prince of Armenia supporting the Sultan against Russia. He, who wrote that Christianity is an instrument in the hands of imperialism, praises the Ottoman Sultan for his wars against colonialism.¹⁹ Marx made it clear that though Ottoman Sultan is imperialistic, that cannot be compared with

European imperialism. He explained with examples that colonialists are swindlers and they are cheating in the name of civilizing mission. Marx was compelled to call the British as man eaters because of the cruelty inflicted upon the Greeks by them in the Ionian Island.²⁰ Marx ratified Hegel's view that Greeks were safe under Sultan rather than under the British.

Marx argued though Ottoman Sultan's rule is a kind of feudalism, the western forces were trying to convert the rule to capitalism. Marx shifted from earlier view that Turkey was a decaying corpse, when he began to realize the facts through his personal study. Till then he was depending upon British information. He also had wrote that the revolution of Prophet Mohammed cannot be undermined and it is more or less same as that of other religions.(Letter written by Engels to Marx in 1853).²¹ After 1853 his approaches seems to be different. Engels himself, who praised French Colonial rule in Algeria under the pretext of "civilizing mission", later began to praise Arab defence against French Colonialism, when it became clear that the French mission was a complete deceit. From the end of 1850 onwards Marx and Engels share sympathy to Arab countries through different essays. In 1882, after visiting Algiers at the age of 64, Marx repeatedly described about the exploitation of Arabs by European forces. "Colonialists continuously threatened isolated Judges with death, if they do not put in jail at least a dozen Arabs for suspected murder (of Europeans). The British and the Dutch are far ahead of French in the matter of cruelty against the under privileged."²² Marx who shows pity to the Muslim people who became subjects of European cruelty, writes that Islam do not approve the inequality among Arabs. "Our Bedouin Arabs through their struggles for existence have imbibed many qualities. See, they have gifted the world many philosophers and Scholars. Europeans are denigrating them due to their present ignorance".²³

In the letters written by Marx in his last years, he strongly supports Turkey Sultan and Islam. He praises Turkey's courage and statesmanship. He congratulates the Sultan on the changes introduced by him in the matter of urbanization and development of villages. He strongly ridicules the self appointed "ambassadors of mediation" from England and France. Marx criticises *Times* news paper and pro Russian writers like Richard Cobden for spreading falsehood against Turkey.²⁴ At the same time Marx fore saw that "this Muslim Kingdom will end and will get itself dissolved in European Civilization".²⁵ Marx also says that the commercial progress of Turkey is not due to their efficiency alone but it is due to the presence of Greek and Slavonic sections of people too. If Turkey gets away from Europe nothing is going to happen to the commerce of the place. At another time Marx wrote that Turkey is not going to sustain and will end up in Communism. Sultan is keeping Constantinople just as a custodian of revolution. At the same time Sultan cannot claim any quality for his country too. Marx sees the Sultan as a person who indirectly supports secularist thoughts. "Sultan is a collaborator for creating the path to revolution".

Crimean war, Turkey – Russia hostility and the moves made by imperialists against Turkey induced Marx to dive deep in to the eastern world. Marx got convinced that there was more truth in Muslim society than what was circulated by the western world. It was due to this, he desired to know more about Islamic world. The life in Muslim countries like Algeria and along with that the social, cultural and anthropological approaches of Islam inspired him to study further about that religion and for this Engels assisted him. In the summer of 1853 Engels presented many facts about Islam to Marx. Engels wrote: "from the last two weeks while I was sitting in the eastern society I got the opportunity to learn Persian language. My natural animosity with Semitic languages estranged me from Arab language. I thought studying that old language was

difficult. That language has 4000 roots. On the other hand the case of Persian; it is child play. In Arabic language there are six letters which look similar. The vowels also are not clear. But I studied the full grammar of Persian within 48 hours.”²⁶

According to Engels the information given by imperialist – capitalist forces and traders about Turkey do not present a clear picture. Marx also was convinced that the remarks he made against Turkey in the early times were not correct. The reason for this was the dependence on western media and data. Marx and Engels made the multi faceted and compromising nature of Turkish kingdom, their subject of study. Armenian Christian Princes praising Turkey and Armenian Cardinal wearing a hat resembling Sultan’s head gear amazed them. ²⁷ The aim of Communism is to eliminate private property. At the same time the existence of a situation without private property in the eastern world astonished Marx. Marx also says that in the eastern village establishment people are the rulers. He relates this social establishment to Islam. ²⁸ In Islam the ownership of wealth is in God. In the letter to Engels, he directs that the book on Mughal empire written by the orientalist writer Bernier has to be read: “Bernier finds out the basic form of the total eastern attitude. He talks about Persia, Turkey and Hindustan. Here private property is not in existence. This is the real key to eastern paradise.” ²⁹ Though Marx is not prepared to idealise Islam as a political model, it can be seen that Islamic thoughts on private property and economic system resembles that of Communist ideology.

In the letter written on the occasion of visiting Algeria, Marx observes the complete equality among Arabs in the matter of economic relations. Still, without working for a revolution they go with Satan (colonialism) and this worries him. ³⁰ In the Russia-Turkey war Marx and Engels stood behind Turkey. Marx found that the farmers of Turkey are enjoying maximum independence and safety.³¹ He vehemently criticised the European countries for not helping Turkey in the war. At the same time Marx observes that Turkey spoilt an opportunity for revolution. Marx points out the independence enjoyed by Christians in Ottoman Kingdom and the help they extended to Sultan in the war. In many letters he describes Prophet Mohammed, the Qur-an and Islam as parts of a social science with a distinct personality. But he was not prepared to recognize Islam as a form of positive revolution. He praises the artistic and ornamental Islamic style. While negating religion with regard to their relations with imperialism, in Marxian approach there exists a different view on Islam in the eastern world. In his last days his adoption of the name Moor (Muslim) and likening his beard to that of the Prophet shows his Muslim favouritism.³² The pity he exhibited towards the Arab World which reeled under the brutality of colonialism also may be read along with this. At the same time this does not mean that he recognized the beliefs of Islam or Prophecy. But he describes in his article the obstruction for publication of the *Qur-an* in Rome. He satirically wrote that with such acts of the Church, Romans will not be “unable” to learn Quran. ³³ When the obstruction to publish the *Quran* was declared smart Christians wrote a criticism to the same (*Rifutatione Alcorano*) which, in fact, was a positive approach to the *Qur-an*. Marx ridiculed the Church citing this fact. According to Almond the anti clergy approach of Islam and the anti capitalist approach of Marxism are both like “in laws”. ³⁴ Marx has also read and understood about Islam and Arabs through German translations. As a youngster he had read German translation of Arabian stories and quotes Arab writer Hariri in his work.

Thus it is analysed that Marx or Engels were basically not against any religion, though they never believed in any one of them. Their inimical attitude against religion was due to the ecclesiastic attitude towards capitalists and colonialists. When the clergy or religious leadership

stood for the masses and marginalized, both supported them and allied with them in the struggles. Marx never worried about the religion, since its abolition or annihilation was not in his agenda. Neither he nor Engels spend much time on discussing religion or God because they were approaching the matters in a different perspective. As described by the self styled writers, Marx was not a Satan who appeared to annihilate religion and God, but he brought a movement in which the emancipation of the working class was the main objective. He supported every attempt, whether it is religious or not, that stood in support of his cause and vehemently opposed whenever any force supported capitalism against the working class.

Notes:

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- 5 . *Qur-an*, 9/34
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7. *Selected Works*, Vol. 3,p.437
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- 9 . Engels, *Anti – Duhring*, Moscow, 1969, pp.374-75
10. Marx and Engels, *Selected Works*, Vol. 3,p.355
11. *Collected Works*, Vol.12,p.22
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19. *Eastern Question*, pp. 174, 269
20. *New York Tribune*, January 6, 1859,On Colonialism, op. cit., p.228
21. Engles to Marx, 1853, June 3, Ian Almond, p.139
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23. Marx to Laura Lafargue, April 13,1882, Ibid, p.373
24. *Eastern Question*, pp.195,310
25. Marx to Engels, March 10, 1853, Saul K.Padovar, op.cit, p.137
26. Engels to Marx, June 6, 1853, Saul K.Padovar, op. cit, p. 137
27. *Eastern Question*, pp.41, 269
28. Ian Almond, Marx the Moor, op.cit, p.145
29. Marx to Engels, June 2,1853, Saul, op.cit., p.
30. Marx, *Letters*, op.cit., p.372
31. Marx to Liebknecht, Feb, 4 , 1878

32. Marx ,Letters.....pp..376-377

33. January 13 , 1843, The Karl Marx Library, 5:31,Ian Almond, p.148

34. Ian Almond , p.148