Explain and discuss Marx’s theory of Alienation and its relevance to his critique of religion. Using one or two specific examples, discuss whether the theory has any relevance to modern expressions of religiosity.

Firstly, I will explain Karl Marx’s theory of alienation (Entfremdung) and consider its relevance to his critique of religion. In addition to this, I will explore to what extent this theory can be applied to contemporary expressions of religiosity; particularly the modern conception of ‘personal religion’ as an individualistic expression of moral values.

Alienation is a dominant theme in Marx’s early writings and is described as being deeply entrenched in organized religion as well as the social, political and economic theories of the time. At its core, the term describes the separation of things that naturally belong together. This multi-faceted concept involves a conflict between humanity’s essential dispositions (e.g. our intrinsic need to develop and express ourselves) and the reality of social, economic and religious life in the 19th century.

Marx assumed that the critique of religion was complete, in his ‘Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right’ he famously opens with “For Germany, the criticism of religion has been essentially that completed, and the criticism of religion is the prerequisite of all criticism.” (Marx, 1844) By this, he means that once the ‘other world truth’ has vanished, we can begin to understand our own world properly. “It is [...] the task of history, once the other-world of truth has vanished, to establish the truth of this world. It is the immediate task of philosophy, which is in the service of history, to unmask self-estrangement ... Thus the criticism of heaven turns into the criticism of Earth, the criticism of religion into the criticism of law and the criticism of theology into the criticism of politics.” (Marx, 1992, pp. 244-5) Marx understood the critique of religion as the beginning of an inescapable form of social evolution. He took this intellectual project upon himself since, as he once famously remarked: “the philosophers have only interpreted the world, the point is to change it.”

The intellectual climate in which Marx worked was dominated by the influence of Hegel. Marx and many of his contemporaries were part of a group known as the Young Hegelians; who rejected what they saw as the conservative and theistic implications of Hegel’s work. Hegel had attacked the French Revolution and the bourgeois society, suggesting that the capitalists represent particularistic interests. (Szelényi, 2009) Hegel had suggested that order could only be restored by the government, since they represent a universal point of view. However, Marx contended that the government had only the appearance of universalism. (Szelényi, 2009) Whilst writing on the ‘Jewish question’ surrounding the Dreyfus affair; Marx responded to a fellow Young Hegelian, Bruno Bauer, who had argued that the Jewish and Christian religions were both barriers to emancipation. (Wolff, 2011) Marx argued that political emancipation alone was not sufficient to bring about what he called human emancipation. Although, Marx never tells us precisely what ‘human emancipation’ is, it is clear that it is closely related to his idea of non-alienated labour, which I will discuss later on. (ibid.) Essentially, Marx would have wanted Bauer to realize that society cannot be cured of its ills simply by freeing the political sphere from religious influence. (McLellan, 1973, pp. 81-82) Religion was seen as man’s indirect recognition of himself through an intermediary. But for Marx, the state is the intermediary between man and his freedom just as religion is.

Marx chose to reinterpret Hegel, arguing that alienation does not come from ideas, as the latter had argued; but rather from the material conditions of political economy. Marx reasoned that we had to “ground this theory in material practices.” (Szelényi, 2009) Because we not only change the world through the way we conceptualize it, as Hegel had argued, but also physically - with plough, shovel and pick. Essentially, Marx argued that it is our material needs that principally direct our interaction with the world rather than ideas. (Wolff, 2003, p. 28)

One fellow Young Hegelian, Ludwig Feuerbach, revised Hegel’s metaphysics whilst critiquing his doctrine of religion and the state. In Marx’s ‘A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of the Right’ he accepts both Feuerbach’s position that human beings had created God in their own image, and his argument that worshipping God diverted human beings from enjoying their own human powers- “To enrich God, man must become poor; that God may be all, man must be nothing.” (Feuerbach, 1957, p. 26) However, Marx criticizes Feuerbach for neglecting to account as to why people fall into religious alienation in the first place. He builds on this by connecting his own ideas surrounding alienation to the critique of religion; highlighting the parallel between alienation in the sphere of politics and in religion. The product of the worker is “alien to him, and... stands opposed to him as an autonomous power. The life which he has given to the object sets itself against him as an
alien and hostile force.” (Giddens, 1978, p. 11) In similar fashion, “The qualities attributed to God in the Christian ethic are thereby removed from the control of men, and become as if imposed by an external agency.” (ibid.) “Marx’s explanation is that religion is a response to alienation in material life, and therefore cannot be removed until human material life is emancipated, at which point religion will wither away.” (Wolff, 2011)

Precisely which aspects of material life create religion is not entirely clear, however it is evident that it is, again, closely linked with the idea of alienated labour, along with a need for human beings to assert their communal essence, which I will discuss later on.

In order to fully understand human material life, and eventually emancipate it; Marx’s methodology began “…with a contemporary fact of political economy.” This fact was the general impoverishment and dehumanization of the worker. In his Paris Manuscripts of 1844, Marx explains that wages, profits and rent all culminate in the alienation of the worker. He argues that when labour becomes a commodity “…political economy knows only the worker as a working animal.” (Marx, 1975, p. 242) In his Parisian manuscripts, Marx introduces the proletariat as the champion of this elusive ‘universal point of view’. Marx reasoned that since they were the most alienated, they ought to be the most invested in combating alienation. (Szelényi, 2009)

Alienated labour is explored in detail in Marx’s economic and philosophical manuscripts. Beginning with the fact of private property, which Marx argues was never explained to us. Private property is merely assumed by the economist, as a by-product of the (again, assumed) greedy nature of man. Therefore, any ‘economic’ phenomenon “…is at the same time always a social phenomenon, and the existence of a particular kind of ‘economy’ presupposes a definite kind of society.” (Giddens, 1978, p. 10) Marx argues that the only wheels which political economy sets into motion are greed and that now we must try to grasp the intrinsic connection between private property and the devaluation of men, “…we have to grasp this whole estrangement.” (Marx, 1975, p. 271)

Marx discussed four main dimensions to alienation. Firstly, there is alienation from the object of production. In what we now call the capitalist mode of production, “The object that labour produces, its product, confronts [the worker] as an alien being, as a power independent of the producer,” … under these conditions this “…realization of labour appears as a loss of reality for the worker.” (Szelényi, 2009) This commodity-producing society is contrasted with petty-commodity production. For example, an artisan producing a product without the tools of industrialization can take pride in, and identify with, the product he has made. Whereas if a labourer is working in a production line, part of an industrial system mass-producing say, cars; the product is not his, and he does not fully identify with it. He is alienated from the product that he produces.

This, Marx argues, is the situation that most people find themselves in. As soon as the product is completed, it is taken away from the worker. (Wolff, 2011) The main point that Marx is driving at here is not that the goods rightfully belong to the worker, but rather that the product of the worker’s labour comes to be regarded on a par with the worker himself. Just as they are, on a purely theoretical level, in the discipline of political economy. “The worker becomes an ever cheaper commodity the more goods he creates. The devaluation of the human world increases in direct relation with the increase in value of the world of things.” (Wolff, 2003, p. 122) Essentially, under capitalism, the worker becomes assimilated to the commodity he produces, and is objectified.

The second dimension to alienated labour is alienation from the act of production; since labour is external to the worker in that it does not belong to his intrinsic nature. He does not affirm himself, but rather deny himself. Many feel, even today that life begins when work ends and this is exactly Marx’s point. (Wolff, 2011) He also makes the point that labour is not voluntary, but forced; undoubtedly not in a legal sense; but if one does not wish to starve, then one needs to work. “His labour is not voluntary, but coerced; it is forced labour… as soon as no physical or other compulsion exists, labour is shunned like the plague.” (Marx, 1975, p. 274) Work is no longer an end in itself, but rather a means to an end. Marx also makes the point that, in the process of production, the worker’s actions are not his own, in the sense that he is being directed by others, “…in it, he belongs not to himself, but to another.” (ibid.) The worker is not really dictating his own actions as he naturally would, but is directed by his superior. Similarly, the relationship between Christians and moral actions reflects this process. Christians do not dictate their own moral choices as they naturally would, but are guided, directed by an external (and superior) source.

Thirdly, the worker is alienated from his ‘species-being’, (Gattungsweesen) or what makes us human and distinct from animals. In the capitalist mode of production, humans produce blindly and not in accordance to their
truly human powers. (Wolff, 2011) “Estranged labour turns thus… [Man’s] species being, both nature and his spiritual species property, into a being alien to him... It estranges from man... his human aspect.” (Marx, 1975, p. 277) Marx now has a theory of man in natural conditions. He decides that it is work that makes us human, working to transform the material world around us to meet our human needs, with a plan. It is the fact that we have a plan, we know what we want from life that means that labour (i.e. the means to realize our plan) is not meaningless. However, Marx sees the capitalist mode of production as alienating labour; we are working, but we are not utilizing our human powers to our own ends, but rather to the ends of the bourgeoisie.

The fourth dimension of alienation, or second aspect to our species-being, is our communal nature and co-operation with our fellow man. “...the human essence is no abstraction inherent in each single individual. In its reality it is the ensemble of the social relations.” (Wolff, 2003, p. 35) Alienation from our fellow man, arises because we do not appreciate our ‘species-life’ for what it is, whether or not we explicitly recognise it, human beings exist as a community and what makes human life possible is our mutual interdependence. “Rather than conceiving of ourselves as members of a vast scheme of co-operation, we tend to think of ourselves as people who go to work to earn money, and then go to shops to spend it.” We use our species-life as the means to our individual-life. We fail to realise that the ways that we pursue our self-interest would not be possible without this communal species-essence.

Marx wanted our institutions to acknowledge our communal essence somewhere, but capitalist institutions fell short of this, offering only a false sense of community. Christianity offered people the hope that all are equal in the eyes of God: “... there are no more distinctions ...all of you are one in Christ Jesus,” (Galatians 3:27) “... for God does not show favouritism.” (Romans 2:11) This need to acknowledge humanity’s communal essence is “At first [...] deviously acknowledged by religion, which creates a false idea of a community in which we are all equal in the eyes of God.” (Wolff, 2011) This was, according to Marx, humanity attempting to cope with injustice; grasping at religion to retrieve aspects of their own humanity (our communal essence) made alien (by a false sense of community). This illusion was unsustainable after the reformation period and the state attempted to fill the void by offering us political emancipation and liberal rights. However, as I mentioned earlier Marx saw political emancipation as inadequate, as it was merely “...the illusion of a community of citizens, all equal in the eyes of the law.” (Wolff, 2011) Liberal rights were critiqued by Marx as being, in some sense, a barrier between people. Since liberal ideas of justice “…are premised on the idea that each of us needs protection from other human beings.” Essentially, they are rights of separation, designed to protect us from perceived threats. Marx turns this negative outlook on its head; suggesting that real freedom is not to be found in freedom from interference, but that it is to be found “...positively in our relations with other people. It is to be found in human community, not in isolation.”

In Britain, in the last decade, recognised ‘communities’ of religious believers have been generally declining and numbers of those stating that they had ‘no religious affiliation’ in the 2011 census has increased by 10%. (Office for National Statistics, 2011) However recent work on secularisation by scholars have explored the impact of what they call “…the subjective turn of modern culture.” (Heelas & Woodhead, 2005) The fact that the global religious market has grown, becoming saturated with ideas from all cultures in various parts of the world has led to huge changes in the entire concept of religion. The main one being this ‘subjective’ turn, in that we choose our own ethics and philosophical understanding of the world for ourselves. These ‘snippets’ of philosophy, ethics and morality are derived from the mainstream media, the web, popular culture and from the traditional religious teachings that are still, very often a part of our upbringing. Now, even more so than in Marx’s time, with the general decline of traditional religious institutions, society is redefining ‘religion’ and the link between them is arguably stronger than ever.

Marx saw religion as being a product of man, of his consciousness that sits outside the world. 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 an inverted world.” (Marx, 1844) In the light of the subjective turn of modern culture- religion, I believe, is no longer the same alien concept, placed outside the world of man. Because we are our own authorities, we have relocated this human-consciousness in the individual. We reject external ‘authority’; and are choosing which external sources of ethics, philosophy etc. to internalise for ourselves. In this, we realise our own human powers instead of projecting them onto a Christian God, since it is we that decide what aspects of humanity are important. What’s interesting is that Marx had essentially predicted this situation, “The criticism of religion disillusions man, so that he will think, act, and fashion his reality like a man who has discarded his illusions and regained his senses, so that he will move around himself as his own true Sun. Religion is only the illusory Sun which revolves around man as long as he does
not revolve around himself.” (Marx, 1844) It is clear that religion continues to exist, even when man ‘revolves around himself’, so to speak. Marx might argue that the very fact that a personal form of religion evolved lends further weight to his theory that religion is primarily a response to material conditions. Whether or not this subjective turn has further increased our alienation from fellow humanity is a subject widely debated but certainly proves the relevance of Marx’s theory in regard to modern expressions of religiosity in the West.

Religion is certainly still a major influence worldwide, and so Marx’s concept of alienation is certainly not one to be overlooked when considering global politics. Following the September 11th attacks on America and the subsequent ‘War on Terrorism’; one might even apply his theory on a contemporary, global scale. With the Eastern, Islamic world having been exploited by the Western ‘bourgeois’ resulting in ‘cultural alienation’; that culminated in violence. Certainly in contemporary Britain, the theory is relevant because of our widely-reported problems in society, stemming from a supposed lack of communal values. One could link this to Marx’s argument in his discussion of political emancipation- that liberalism results in alienation from our communal species-essence. We are still arguably a ‘plaything of alien forces’ and the problems of 19th century modernity examined by Marx are certainly still manifest in the world today. Therefore, alienation is definitely still relevant to modern discussion of religion and society.
Bibliography


