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Religion and Poverty





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# **Religion and Poverty**

**Edited by Frank Jacob**

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## **Global Humanities – Studies in Histories, Cultures, and Societies**

02/2015: Religion and Poverty

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## Editorial

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 of the people.<sup>1</sup>

Karl Marx (1818–1883) is known for his “repeated, and often polemical, statements against religion”<sup>2</sup> through which he became an important predecessor of many of the radical critics of religion in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, including Georges Bataille (1897–1962), Rudolf Bultmann (1884–1976), Gustavo Gutiérrez (\*1928), and Martin Heidegger (1889–1976).<sup>3</sup> However, the opium referred to in his oft-quoted statement (given above) can be read as occupying an ambivalent conceptual position. Here, Opium (or religion) might not only be interpreted as a “destructive narcotic”, but “also a protest” against the real suffering of the people.<sup>4</sup> Opium held something of a double meaning during the late 19<sup>th</sup> century: as both a useful and inexpensive medicine, and also as a source of illness and destructive addiction. In this way, Opium also existed as a “multidimensional metaphor”<sup>5</sup> for Marx.

Through their numerous writings on religion,<sup>6</sup> Marx and Friedrich Engels (1820–1895) formulated the widely known argument that religion can only be explained through an exploration of the social and economic factors responsible for its condition.<sup>7</sup> Despite the fact that Marx argued for an abolition of religion, he also recognized that religion appeared to offer a form of

1 Karl Marx: Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Law: Introduction. In: *Marx and Engels Collected Works*, vol. 3. Moscow: Progress 1975, pp. 175–187, here p. 175.

2 James Luchte: Marx and the Sacred. In: *Journal of Church and State* 51,3 (2009), pp. 413–437, here p. 413.

3 *Ibid.*, pp. 414–415.

4 Roland Boer: Opium, Idols and Revolution: Marx and Engels on Religion. In: *Religion Compass* 5,11 (2011), pp. 698–707, here p. 703.

5 *Ibid.*

6 Friedrich Engels / Karl Marx: *Die heilige Familie, oder, Kritik der kritischen Kritik, gegen Bruno Bauer & Consorten*. Frankfurt am Main: Rütten 1845; Karl Marx: Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Law, trans. from German by Martin Milligan / Barbara Ruhemann. In: *Marx and Engels Collected Works*, vol. 3. London: Lawrence & Wishart 1975, pp. 3–129; Karl Marx: *Ökonomisch-philosophische Manuskripte. Geschrieben von April bis Aug. 1844. Karl Marx. Nach der Handschrift*. Leipzig: Reclam 1968.

7 Boer: Opium, p. 699. For a detailed study on Marx’s and Engels’ criticism of religion, see Roland Boer: *Criticism of Earth: On Marx, Engels and Theology*. Leiden: Brill 2012.

liberation, rather than oppression, to those who suffered in poverty.<sup>8</sup> As such, religion might become an expression of protest for those who suffered; an appropriate reply to the hardships of human life. Consequently Marx arrived at the formulation that religion was “the wrong way of protesting something that deserves to be protested.”<sup>9</sup>

Whether or not one sits in agreement with Marx’s criticisms, religion was and remains a significant part of human culture and belief systems, both now and throughout history. Religion not only bears a relationship to poverty, but as Lisa A. Keister has argued, it is “a very strong predictor of adult wealth”<sup>10</sup>. In this way, we can also trace a general interrelationship between wealth and religion. Further, the “success of capitalism and the democratization of higher education did not diminish religious life”<sup>11</sup>, a fact that would appear to undermine Marx’s claim that religion was merely an expression of and mechanism for control of those suffering in poverty. However, we cannot neglect the current reality of the apparently strong religious beliefs in regions of the world that are suffering from poverty – the so called “Third World” – and a concomitant, general decline of religious beliefs and traditions in many parts of the industrialized world. Poverty, in addition to other factors such as race,<sup>12</sup> remains a distinguishing force for religion.

We can describe a three-pronged relationship between religion and poverty, wherein religion:

- 1) redirects the thoughts of the poor to religious concerns;
- 2) provides the necessary moral structures for a culture and society that might stimulate generosity;
- 3) encourages attempts to alleviate poverty itself.<sup>13</sup>

8 Kathryn Lofton: *The Sigh of the Oppressed? Marxism and Religion in America Today*. In: *New Labour Forum* 21,3 (2012), pp. 58–65, here pp. 58–59.

9 *Ibid.*, p. 59. Antonio Gramsci (1891–1937) also suggested that religion could be seen as a form of protest against a hegemonial system. See Dwight B. Billings: *Religion as Opposition: A Gramscian Analysis*. In: *American Journal of Sociology* 96,1 (1990), pp. 1–31, here pp. 6–9.

10 Lisa A. Keister: *Faith and Money: How Religion Contributes to Wealth and Poverty*. New York: Cambridge UP 2011, p. 132.

11 Lofton: *The Sigh*, p. 58.

12 Matthew O. Hunt: *Religion, Race / Ethnicity, and Beliefs about Poverty*. In: *Social Science Quarterly* 83,3 (2002), pp. 810–831, here pp. 815–816.

13 Jaco Beyers: *The Effect of Religion on Poverty*. In: *HTS Teologiese Studies / Theological Studies* 70,1 (2014), Art. #2614, 8 pages. <http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/hts.v70i1.2614> (accessed 01.06.2015), p. 1.



The effects of this relationship, however, can be read as either positive or negative. Poverty itself appears to have no tangibly positive effect on humanity, despite the claims of certain religious figures whose personal catharsis emerged through poverty.<sup>14</sup>

Most notably in Latin America, the positive effect of religion – namely a possible alleviation of poverty – was underscored by a reinterpretation of Christian theology during the 1960s, the so-called ‘liberation theology’ as formulated by Gutiérrez and Juan Luis Segundo (1925–1996). Their intention was simple: “to transform society through social action and on the basis of the Christian message of justice, peace, and love.”<sup>15</sup> Religion consequently was no longer seen as an offer for theodicies<sup>16</sup>, but as a feasible solution for the abolishment of poverty. However, both religion and poverty are still in existence, and both seem to be resistant to disappearance. Consequently, neither Marxist theories nor philanthropic attempts to solve global poverty could be read as offering successful or suitable answers to the problem of poverty. It is far more likely that religion and poverty are inseparable elements of human history, a point that this present volume attempts to address, by probing some of the questions implicated in this specific interrelation.

The first contribution by Benjamin Beit-Hallahmi provides a survey of sociological discussions about the interrelationship between religion and poverty, focusing on the parameters of crisis, sectarianism, race, and mobility as offering possible explanations for human religiosity. The following two articles by Sabine Müller and Divya Kannan focus on historical perspectives concerning the interrelationship of religion and poverty. While Müller’s article analyzes Lucian’s *Alexander of Abonuteichos*’ historic assessment of poverty and religion, Kannan’s contribution highlights the relationship between poverty and the education program of the London Missionary Society in South India during the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Following the sociological and historical perspectives, the next section focuses on religious perspectives. Alvin Lim analyzes the role of an excessively “performed” poverty within the Daoist practice of money-burning in Singapore, a performance through which believers hope to gain salvation. Jeremiah Unterman then provides a close reading of the Jewish Bible to gain an insight

14 Francis of Assisi (1181/1182–1226) would be one example.

15 Judith Soares: Religion and Poverty in the Caribbean. In: *Peace Review: A Journal of Social Justice* 20,2 (2008), pp. 226–234, here p. 226.

16 Max Weber: *Economy and Society*, vol. 1. Totawa, NJ: Bedminster 1921, pp. 495–498.

into the social and ethical aspects of its descriptions and rules. The section on religious perspectives concludes with the contribution by Logan Cochrane and Waleed Chellan, whose article is dealing with the interrelationship of religious adherence and economic status in the modern Muslim world.

The final article by Atara Moscovich adds an artistic perspective to the reading of the interrelationship between religion and poverty. By giving a detailed interpretation of Giovanni Bellini's (ca. 1430–1516) *Sacred Allegory*, Moscovich explores how artistic interpretations of the interrelationship of religion and poverty were expressed in the religious art of the Renaissance.

The second volume of *Global Humanities* again brings together researchers from different disciplines, in order to discuss what presents itself as a driving question within the humanities from a global and interdisciplinary perspective. This volume was made possible through the professionalism of its contributors, to whom I extend my thanks. I would also like to express my gratitude to Matthias Naumann and Frank Schlöffel from Neofelis Press for their invaluable and steady support.

Frank Jacob

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