

Marx and Nietzsche's Critique of Religion: Reflections on the Rise of Secularism

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Abstract: *This article discusses Karl Marx and Friedrich Nietzsche's critique of religion and its relevance to the rise of secularism. Marx reduced religion to the realm of the social, material and ideological. Nietzsche, on the other hand, provided historical and psychological explanations of religion. These discourses about religion shattered the spiritual and metaphysical foundation of religion as well as of religious truths. The ideas of Marx and Nietzsche contributed a lot to secularism that placed religion to the private sphere and recognized that all religions are equal.*

Keywords: *Marx, Nietzsche, Religion, Secularism*

The Russian Orthodox Archbishop, Hilarion Alfeyev, claims that one of the challenges that Christianity is facing is secularization.¹ Secularization is the process that led to the establishments of institutions that reject the significance of religion in societies. The effect of secularization can be seen in the people's attitude not to be affiliated with any religion and not incline with religious practice. Secularization has changed people's mind-set about religion. Some no longer believe while others still believe but according to their own terms. Religion becomes one of the options that give meaning to self and existence. It is no longer seen as the sole "fountain of life." The influence of secularization prevails because of ideas that penetrated societies and institutions. These ideas are called as secularism.

What is secularism?

In my article, *From Secularism to Post-Secularism: Jurgen Habermas on Religion in Secular State*, a section was devoted on the exposition of secularism based on different perspectives. One

¹ Please see the Elizabeth Scalia's on-line article, Russian Orthodox Archbishop Hilarion Alfeyev has a warning for the West, in *Aleteia*, September 26, 2017.

of the perspectives discussed was that of Helge Hoibraaten where secularism is seen as influenced by modern philosophical thought that provided different understanding of God. Secularism, for Hoibraaten, is a "kind of assertive self-defense against the frightening thought potential to medieval theological absolutism."² It is a "human self-assertion against the theological absolutism of the late Middle Ages."³ The philosophical ideas of Rene Descartes and Immanuel Kant are influential to the development of secularism.

The understanding of God has been revolutionized by Descartes' consciousness. Descartes created an "inner castle" – the consciousness that contains representations that are evidently true and that provide us with the "foundations for the methodical control of the world."⁴ Descartes argues that the idea of God in one's consciousness is caused by a "formally infinite reality,"⁵ which is God Himself; one, however, becomes conscious of such idea when he/she becomes conscious of himself/herself as an existing and thinking being. Hence, the consciousness of God follows after being conscious of oneself as thinking and existing being.

Kant, on the other hand, does not deny the existence of God; however, he explains that God's existence cannot be proven theoretically, for it is a matter of faith.⁶ Aside from that, Kant sees God as the goal of moral order, not as its source. It is impractical for God to be the source of moral order, for human beings will only act on fear. They will be like marionettes or mechanical puppets without dignity.⁷ Kant gives freedom paramount importance and he defines it in the context of morality.⁸ It is important for individuals to know and understand moral laws as well as the consequences in disobeying it. They must know their moral duties and must act based on such duties. For Kant, immoral acts, or evil, is a product of reason – a reason that rejects practical reason.⁹ It is

² Helge Hoibraaten, (Post-metaphysical Thought), "Religion and Secular Society" in *The Holberg Prize Seminar 2005, Holberg Prize Laureate Professor Jurgen Habermas: Religion in Public Sphere*, 51.

³ *Ibid.*, 54.

⁴ *Ibid.*,

⁵ Lawrence Nolan and Alan Nelson, "Proofs for the Existence of God" in *The Blackwell Guide to Descartes' Meditations*, ed. Stephen Gaukroger (USA: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2006), 110.

⁶ Hoibraaten, *op cit.*, 56.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 55.

⁹ *Ibid.*

an act of freedom that is against the moral order – the moral order that makes freedom possible.¹⁰ The existence of God, for Kant, is a product of practical reason. As what mentioned a while ago, God is the goal of moral order. One is behaving morally towards God. It is precisely the practical reason for God's existence: God's existence provides comfort for those who behave morally that in the end, those who are moral will be rewarded.

Descartes and Kant's ideas influenced the development of the idea of human self-assertion against theological absolutism, because their ideas of God emanate from individual's consciousness as well as from individual's practical reason. It is no longer an idea of God that is absolutely outside and independent of one's existence. It is a God born out of the human person's consciousness and reason.

This article follows Hoibraaten's thesis of secularism that is influenced by modern thinkers that changed the medieval understanding of God. This paper, however, argues that aside from Descartes and Kant, the philosophical thought of Karl Marx and Friedrich Nietzsche are also influential to the development of secular thought and ideas. This article is divided into three parts. The first two parts are expositions of Marx and Nietzsche's critique of religion. The third part is a discussion of the relevance of Marx and Nietzsche's critique to secularism.

The primary of objective to this article is not to resurrect old themes in philosophy such as that of Marx and Nietzsche but to illustrate philosophical ideas contribution to the development of a modern phenomenon which is secularism. Understanding of these ideas is important for a better understanding of secularism and secularization. This article, however, does not promote secularism or atheism. It wants to demonstrate how ideas influenced the rise of social phenomena and events.

I. Karl Marx's Reduction of the Sacred to the Realm of the Material, Social, and Ideological

Karl Marx does not see religion as a creation of the divine; it is man's creation.¹¹ Religion is a product of man's existence. It is

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 56.

¹¹ Karl Marx, "Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right" in K. Marx and

a projection of his self-consciousness and self-feeling that cannot be separated from his material existence.¹² It is a projection that reversed his world consciousness of misery and imperfection. It is also a protest against the real distress experienced by man.¹³ Marx concludes that religion is the “sigh of the oppressed,” the “heart of a heartless world,” and the spirit of a spiritless nation” and the “opium of the people.”¹⁴ It is religion that provides the poor and the oppressed consolation from their woes and miseries as well as justification to accept oppression and poverty, forgetting to struggle and to overcome his miserable situation. Marx says:

*...religion disillusioned man to make him think and act and shape his reality like a man who has been disillusioned and has come to reason, so that he will revolve round himself and therefore round his true sun. Religion is only the illusory sun which revolves round man as long as he does not revolve round himself.*¹⁵

Feuerbach's idea of religion is influential to Marx's. It is an idea that dissolved the supernatural and spiritual nature of religion and reduced it into its secular basis.¹⁶ Religion is nothing but man's “duplication of the world into a religious, imaginary world and a real one.”¹⁷ It is a product of his imagination to create a perfect and ideal world, perfect and ideal being. Religion is the collective human essence. Marx interprets this idea of Feuerbach by saying that religion is a social product and the “ensemble of social relations.”¹⁸ The mysteries and mysticism of religion “find their rational solution in human practice and in the comprehension of this practice.”¹⁹

Marx follows Feuerbach explanation of God where he elevates the “human to its rightful place” in order to “downgrade the divine.”²⁰ And this divine – the only God there is – is but an “external

F. Engels, *On Religion* (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1957), 41-42.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*, 42.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Karl Marx, “Theses on Feuerbach” in K. Marx and F. Engels, *On Religion* (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1957), 70.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 71.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Quentin Lauer, “Response Occasioned by McGovern's ‘Atheism: Is It Essential to

projection of human aspirations.”²¹ Feuerbach’s influence to Marx’s idea of religion makes Marx’s philosophy of religion social and not metaphysical because of its emphasis on the role of man and his society in the creation of religion. Marx provides an analysis about the social factors that caused the creation of religion. It includes an analysis on the social power and influence religion has over man. Marx sees religion as a phenomenon that “grows out of human situation” and as an “expression of powers in whose net human beings find themselves.”²²

Marx did not only reduce religion into the realm of the social and material but also into the realm of the ideological. Ideology is a system of ideas that are unscientific and that promulgates illusions, half-truths, misleading arguments, incomplete analyses, unsupported assertions, and implausible premises.²³ Ideology is the “manifestation of social consciousness in the religious, legal, juridical, and political structures.”²⁴

Ideology is a tool to promote the interests of individuals or class.²⁵ They use ideology to foster illusions and cast a veil over clear thinking in order to promote and protect their interests. It is, therefore, not pure ideas. It is a set of political ideas created and manufactured in order to promote and protect the interests of a class. It is created not to transmit pure knowledge but to propagate knowledge for the welfare of any social class.

Ideology is a “form of social consciousness” that is molded and firmed by social existence that involves the interaction between the economic base and superstructures of society.²⁶ The base is the foundation of the society that sustains its existence. It is also the primary source of income and livelihood of its members. The superstructures are the institutions in the society like the state, government, and the church. Ideology as a form of social consciousness is linked with Marx’s notion of praxis. Praxis is a purposive and conscious human activity that is aimed at producing

Marxism?” in *The Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, vol. XXII, Summer 1985, no. 3, 525.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Esad Cemic, “Marx’s Critique of Religion and/or Atheism” in *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, vol. XXII, Summer 1985, no. 3, 519.

²³ Terrell Carver, *A Marx Dictionary* (New Jersey: Barnes & Noble Books, 1987), 89.

²⁴ Virgilio A. Ojoy, OP, *Marxism and Religion: A Fusion of Horizons* (Manila: UST Publishing House, 2001), 209.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid., 91.

material life.²⁷ In the context of praxis, ideology “corresponds to the consciousness, i.e., ideas, laws, visions, by which man creates and re-creates his existence in and with the world.”²⁸ This consciousness is not a “conglomerate of perceptions” but a social consciousness that is always socially conditioned.²⁹

Based on the foregoing, consciousness cannot be separated from man’s praxis and material existence. It is influenced by the circumstances surrounding man’s material and social existence. According to Ojoy, “human beings have always conditioned, if not determined, by the ‘given circumstances,’ whether this be pure nature as far as the first man (or group of human beings) is concerned, or nature already altered by previous generations with a definite set of structure and superstructure.”³⁰ In the language of Marx, the human essence is dependent to the base and superstructure. He says, “this sum of productive forces, capitals and forms of social intercourse which every individual and every generation finds already in existence is the real basis of what the philosophers imagined to be the ‘substance’ and ‘essence of man.’”³¹ That is why the understanding and analysis of ideological discourses should start from the material conditions and material intercourse of the proponents of ideology. It should not start from what is “fancy or imagined;” but instead from the “really active men and the real life-process.”³²

Religious ideologies cannot be separated from the material existence of man. Like other ideologies, it is a product of society. According to Marx, it is very obvious that the nature of worship is determined by the form of society - ghosts, bonds, higher being, concept, doubtfulness are but the “idealistic spiritual expression, the idea of the apparently isolated individual, the idea of very empiric fetters and limitations within which the mode of production of life and the forms of intercourse corresponding to it move.”³³ Marx further argues that the primitive man’s religious fantasy production” is equivalent to the “real production of the

²⁷ Ibid., 210.

²⁸ Ojoy, 211.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ojoy, 211.

³¹ Marx and Engels, "The German Ideology," K. Marx and F. Engels, *On Religion* (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1957) 78.

³² Ibid., 74.

³³ Ibid, 75.

means of subsistence and of life itself.”³⁴

Marx proclaims that the “religious world is but the reflex of the real world.”³⁵ And since the social and real world is based on the production of commodities, religion is a commodity produced by the society for the consumption of its members. Religion, from Marx’s point of view, can only arise and exist when the “development of the productive power of labour has not risen beyond a low stage, and when therefore the social relations within the sphere of material life, between man and man, and between man and nature, are correspondingly narrow.”³⁶ The low stage of labor and the narrowness of social relations, according to Marx, can be observed in different popular religions.³⁷ Religion arouse because of this narrowness of social relations and low stage of labor. Religion, therefore, is an institution produced by primitive and less advanced society.

II. Friedrich Nietzsche’s Reduction of Religion to the Realm of Historical and Psychological

Friedrich Nietzsche criticizes philosophy because it sees man as *aeterna veritas*, an “everlasting true.”³⁸ It means that man remains “constant in the midst of all flux” and he is the measure of all things. Philosophers view man as the “fixed form from which one has to start out.”³⁹ They speak of man as the “*eternal*” towards “whom all things in the world have had a natural relationship from the time he began.”⁴⁰ This, for Nietzsche, is one of the fairy tales that man believe in and which he turned into an absolute truth for thousands of years. In this sense, Nietzsche proclaims: “But everything has become: there are *no eternal facts*, just as there are no absolute truths. Consequently what is needed from now on is *historical philosophizing*, and with it the virtue of modesty.”⁴¹ There is no eternal and everlasting truth, man is a

³⁴ Ibid., 78.

³⁵ K. Marx, “Capital” in K. Marx and F. Engels, *On Religion* (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1957), 134.

³⁶ Ibid., 135.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human*, trans. R.J Hollingdale (USA: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 12.

³⁹ Ibid., 13.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

product of history and he has become because of history. Hence, philosophizing must focus not only on the understanding of the eternal and unchanging truths but also on the understanding of how history shaped and is continuously shaping man and his world of ideals and truths.

Nietzsche also criticizes philosophy because of its preoccupation with the "world of appearance." The world has become colorful for thousands of years because of man's interpretations. Appearance is a product of man's intellect – "appearance appeared" because of the human intellect; and this human intellect transported erroneous basic conceptions about appearance.⁴² Philosophers are fond of abstraction in order to understand and explain the being of beings. Based on abstraction, they explain what they claim as the real essence and the true nature of beings. These beings, for Nietzsche, are simply appearances. These appearances are classified, defined, and conceptualized by the human intellect. They are also given names, ranks, and order. Beings do not reveal its essence and nature to the intellect. Rather, essence and nature are products of man's intellect; it is man who is responsible for putting more colors into it and making it appear as such.⁴³ For centuries, Nietzsche claims, man thinks in that way.

Nietzsche illustrates his point by giving an example of philosophers' interpretation of a painting. Philosophers look at a painting – a "painting that has been unrolled once and for all and unchangeably depicts the same scene: this scene, they believe, has to be correctly interpreted, so as to draw a conclusion as to the nature of the being that produced the picture: that is to say, as to the nature of the thing itself, which is customary to regard as the sufficient reason for the existence of the world of appearance."⁴⁴ However, Nietzsche argues, what appears are just appearance and "precisely not the thing in itself;" and so, no conclusion can be drawn from it as to the nature of the painting or any object or thing.⁴⁵ This painting is what man calls as life and experience.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ In the book, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Nietzsche states that the "human being first put values into things, in order to preserve itself – it created a meaning for things, a human's meaning!" (please see F. Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for Everyone and Nobody*, trans. Graham Parkes, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 52.). These statements of Nietzsche mean that man is responsible for creating meanings into things. The ideas and truths that one knows about things are man's interpretations.

⁴⁴ F. Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human*, 19.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 19-20.

Philosophers have overlooked that life and experience cannot be fully explained and understood. That is so because life and experience are still in the process of becoming and “should not be regarded as a fixed object on the basis of which a conclusion as to the nature of its originator...may either be drawn or pronounced undrawable.”⁴⁶ That is why the knowledge that man has about his life, experience, and world is erroneous and fantasy. Man is dependent for centuries on this type of knowledge which he considered as treasure.

Metaphysical knowledge and truths are cherished by man for centuries because they provide him the belief on the “ultimate foundation” of beings “upon which the whole future of mankind is then invited to establish and construct itself.”⁴⁷ This makes difficult for man to abandon metaphysics. According to Nietzsche, the “attention of the individual is too firmly fixed on his own brief span of life and receives no stronger impulse to work at the construction of enduring institutions intended to last for centuries; he wants to pluck the fruit himself from the tree he plants, and he is therefore no longer interested and are intended to provide shade for long successions of generations.”⁴⁸ Others want to construct their own house or institution but they are hesitant because they have the feeling that he is at the same time “proposing to immure himself alive in a mausoleum.” Nietzsche in these passages points out that man is very much immersed with his metaphysical beliefs and truths. That he is not comfortable searching for other beliefs and truths aside from metaphysical. He is very much “at home” with these metaphysical ideas and ideals. However, Nietzsche stresses it needs to be abandoned for it does not provide us meaning at all.⁴⁹

The assault against metaphysics leads to the deconstruction of religion and its ideas, ideals and truths. Religion, for Nietzsche, has a historical and psychological explanation. Its truth, and the truths that it preaches, do not come from the “heavens above.”⁵⁰

⁴⁶ Ibid., 20.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 23.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ For Nietzsche, there are no “inner worlds” and “spiritual causes.” All are but man’s interpretations. The “inner worlds” and “spiritual causes” are what he calls as results of man’s “intrinsic depravity of reason” (please see Nietzsche’s “The Twilight of the Idols” in *Twilight of the Idols and the AntiChrist*, trans. Thomas Common, New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 2004, 23-25).

⁵⁰ For Nietzsche the truth about religion and God is a human work. It is even a product of man’s madness. He says: “Ah, brothers, this God that I created was humans’ – work and – madness,

Religious truths have no basis at all for there is no metaphysical truth. Nietzsche replaced this metaphysical approach and framework with historical and psychological explanations.

First and foremost, he claims that religion does not “contain a truth” because it was “born out of fear and need, it has crept into existence along paths of aberrations of reason.”⁵¹ Historically, religion concerns “nature and our traffic with nature.” This means that there was a time in history when people see every event and human phenomenon as a “result of magical influences.” Illness and natural calamities, for example, were seen as works of the supernatural. Magical rituals were created in order to communicate to the supernatural to heal the sick or to prevent natural calamities. These “magic and miracles” were thought of in order to impose of a law on nature. Ceremonies and rituals were created in order to establish “magical relationship with nature” to prevent calamities, disasters, illnesses, and deaths. Later on these ceremonies and rituals were systematized and institutionalized to have a continuous communication with nature.

Religion originates from the ideas of sorcery; and the nobler ideas of sympathy, goodwill, gratitude, hearing of petitions, treaties between enemies, bestowal of pledges, and claim of protection of property.⁵² The origin of religion is not supernatural or spiritual. It originates from the survival and preservation of the man and the other desires of the ego that is sympathy, goodwill, gratitude, and protection of property. Religion, including its ceremonies and rituals and teachings and dogmas, is established because of man’s desire to overcome nature and natural which was being perceived before as supernatural. Hence, the so called sacred rituals and divine truths of religion are not supernatural and extraordinary. They have a natural origin and explanation.

Psychologically, religion is related to the ego of man. Man, Nietzsche argues, compares himself with a being who is “unegoistic and lives continually in the consciousness of a selfless mode of thought,”⁵³ and that being is God. Man mirrors himself with God and he realizes that his own nature is so dismal and

just like all Gods!” (please see *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 27.)

⁵¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, Trans. Walter Kaufman and R.J. Hollingdale, Ed. Walter Kaufman (New York: Vintage Books, 1968), p. 62.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ *Ibid.* 71.

uncommonly distorted. Furthermore, the thought of this being makes man fearful of the idea of punishment and chastising justice that this being brings to those who are egoistic or selfish. Man's desire, therefore, is to be selfless and unegoistic. Such desire, for Nietzsche, is an "error in reason" and an "imperfect work of human imagination and action."⁵⁴ It is so because it is being unegoistic is natural to man.⁵⁵ It is unthinkable for man to be otherwise. He explains:

*No man has ever done anything that was done wholly for others and with no personal motivation whatever; how, indeed, should a man be **able** to do something that had no reference to himself, that is to say lacked all inner compulsion... How could the ego act without the ego? ...one loves neither father, nor mother, nor wife, nor child, one loves the pleasant sensations they produce in us.*⁵⁶

In other words, man idealizes selflessness and unegoistic because he loves himself. He experiences pleasure in these selfless and unegoistic thoughts and actions. When man practices humility and holiness, he experiences real delight. He experiences delight in "oppressing himself with excessive claims and afterwards idolizing this tyrannically demanding something in his soul."⁵⁷ That is why Nietzsche concludes that when man worships God he is worshipping partly himself and at the same time he diabolizes others.⁵⁸

Self-denial, as manifested in asceticism and holiness, is not moral at all. It offers, according to Nietzsche, the "highly tensed heart an opportunity to relieve itself."⁵⁹ Man is really concerned with the discharge of his emotion, and to relieve himself of this emotion and tension he "seizes the spears of his enemies and buries them in his own breast."⁶⁰ In other words, self-denial is

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ In his work, *The Twilight of the Idols*, Nietzsche comments that "all naturalism in morality...is ruled by an instinct of life" and antinatural morality is itself "against the instincts of life" (see "The Twilight of the Idols" in *Twilight of the Idols and the AntiChrist*, trans. Thomas Common, New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 2004, 21). This means that an act that emanates from man's natural instinct such as the instinct to preserve himself is moral. Being selfish and egoistic are moral even though in eyes of Christian religion these are immoral.

⁵⁶ F. Nietzsche, *Will to Power*, 71.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 74.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 75.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 74.

not self-denial and moral at all. Man is willing to sacrifice himself in order to liberate himself of whatever emotional and spiritual burden he has. Self-denial gives man a feeling of greatness and a feeling of pleasure because he experiences relief from all emotional and internal struggles and predicaments he has. However, self-denial makes man great because it is perceived by others as a genuine self-sacrifice for the goodness of others. This is the reason why man honors saints, according to Nietzsche.⁶¹ The saint, Nietzsche says, "signifies in the eyes of the non-saints, that gives him his world-historic value."⁶² The saints acquired the extraordinary power they possess, which helps them to dominate the imagination of men, because they were mistaken for what they were not and their psychological states were interpreted falsely.

Nietzsche challenges the truths of religion simply because religion and its truths have historical and psychological origins and explanations. In other words, religious truths have human origins, and not extraordinary and supernatural. In the words of Nietzsche: "where you see ideal things, I see what is – human, alas, all-too-human!"⁶³ Nietzsche's message is liberation of the self from religious truths and ideals. Such truths cannot be trusted and relied on, only our self.⁶⁴ According to Georges Bataille, the message of Nietzsche is nothing but trust on our selves. He says, "We can't rely on anything. Except ourselves."⁶⁵ Trust in the self not for the sake of trusting it and falsifying others. Trust in the self is important for the deconstruction of truths and for the reconstruction of another set of truths that are truly truths. But for this self to be trusted in the deconstruction and reconstruction of religious and metaphysical truths, it must first be set free. According to Nietzsche: "If we want to create, we have to credit ourselves with much more freedom than previously was given us and thus free ourselves of morality and bring liveliness to our celebration."⁶⁶ Nietzsche espouses free spirit because it is only by

⁶¹ Ibid., 78.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), 283.

⁶⁴ Nietzsche claims that the modern man does not believe in theism because of its unintelligibility. This unintelligibility is caused by arguments and counterarguments raised against the logical explanation of God's existence. This unintelligibility resulted to what Nietzsche calls, "profound mistrust" (please see F. Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. Marion Faber, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008, 49).

⁶⁵ Georges Bataille, *On Nietzsche*, trans. Bruce Boone (USA: Paragon House, 1992), 3.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 5.

being free spirit that man will seek and know the truth. By being free spirit, one thinks differently and thereby making thinking and philosophizing dangerous. The essential characteristic of free spirit is liberation from the shackles of traditions, regardless of the outcome. The demand of spirit free is not the truth but reason.

III. Marx and Nietzsche's Relevance to Secularism

Secularism is a mind-set that dethroned the old and is, later on, successfully translated into constitutional and legal principles and into social norms that paved the way for the birth of modern institutions. It is a mind-set that "does not evidentially depend on the existence of God, or on theological considerations, or on the pronouncement of a person on institution qua religious authority."⁶⁷ Secularism develops not only a mind-set but also an attitude towards religion and religious belief. It is an attitude of negation of religion's role in social and public lives as well as an attitude of doubt to the validity and certainty of religious truths.

Secularist thinking does not see truth as transcendental and metaphysical; and, it does not also see social, political and legal practices, processes, and institutions from vantage of transcendental and metaphysical realities. It sees truth, practices, process and institutions as constructions of the human persons; hence, can be altered by them. Its truth is based on the discourses of contemporary sciences and on pragmatic solutions to human problems and miseries. It is this mind-set and attitude that divide the religious and the state. The former operates in the framework of secular mind-set and attitude that contradicts religious realities and validities.

Marx and Nietzsche demystified religion. They tried to remove religion of its divine and sacred status and place it into the realm of the social, material, historical and psychological. They also provided a human explanation and natural understanding of religion that negates its mystical origin. That religion is created by man because of imperfection, fear and miserable situation. It is created out of necessity. It is a projection of his desire to achieve perfection, happiness and tranquility. Moreover, religion is also

⁶⁷ Hugh Baxter, *Habermas: The Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy* (California: Stanford University Press, 2011), 196.

an instrument of power because it can control behavior and influence one's consciousness.

Marx and Nietzsche's critique is intended to take away religion's influence to man's social life by making religious truths including its rituals and ceremonies meaningless. They exposed the human and natural origin of religion. They explained religion and its pomp from the points of view of the social, the historical and the psychological. These exposition and explanation tried to cast away the mystical and supernatural underpinnings of religion which are the source of its meaning and influence to man's social life.

The ideas of Marx and Nietzsche disenchant religion. They removed the magic of religion and neglected the power of God.⁶⁸ They dissolved the existence of the world of the spirits, the transcendental. The so called "other world" – the heavenly kingdom and the spiritual of world – are nothing but mental constructions. Meanings, therefore, for Marx and Nietzsche are in the mind.⁶⁹ The meanings that man knows about God and the spirit world are not revealed but formulated by the human intellect.

Marx and Nietzsche criticized religion as a pre-requisite to the development of society and advancement of human thought. They saw religion as obstacle to development and advancement. Religion put a veil on man's intellect that obscure his sight to see things clearly and rightly, and to see things from different perspectives. The veil must be removed for the intellect to see things on broader horizons. Hence, the critique of religion that will remove the veil to "clear the mist from the eyes so that the eyes can see what the mist may have been hiding."⁷⁰ Marx and Nietzsche's critique paved the way for creativity and innovation of the human mind.

The secularist mind-set that religion plays no important role in modern society is fortified by Marx and Nietzsche's critique of religion. They extinguished the absolute in religion and thereby making it as only one of those social factors that provide meaning

⁶⁸ Charles Taylor, *Dilemmas and Connections: Selected Essays* (United States of America: Harvard University Press, 2011), 289.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 288.

⁷⁰ Jay Geller, Table "Dancing in an Opium Den: Marx's Conjurament of Criticism out of 'Criticism of Religion' in 1844" in *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 26 (2014), 6.

to man. The extinction of the absolute in religion gave the secularist the reason to recognize the existence of faiths and treat each and every religious community and organization as equal. The relevance of religion is now subjective and relative, only to those who believe and not to all members of the society. In this context, secularism has become the democratic state's response to diversity.⁷¹ Hence, the birth of the secular principles of separation between church and state as well as of religious freedom. These principles aim is to shun political favoritism of one faith or religion over the other. The principles of religious freedom and separation of church and state, along with the principles of the freedom of the press, freedom of speech, freedom of assembly, are one of the responses of modern democratic societies to political, ideological, cultural diversities. These principles recognize and resolve diversity in modern society.

IV. Concluding Remarks

Secularism has provided the breeding ground for diversity and plurality. On the brighter side, secularism recognizes the existence of faiths that provide meanings to individuals' earthly existence. It allows every believer to practice and express one's faith and belief. It reminds everyone to respect differences in religious traditions and doctrines. However, the downside of secularism is that it also challenges the universal validity of religious truths. The validity of these truths are only for those who believe. In this context, expression of faith and religious practice are relegated to the personal and private realms in order to avoid conflict. These are prohibited in the public realm for practical reason of not offending the sensibilities of both believers and non-believers and for the ideal reason that religious truths have no universal validity. Secularism respects religious freedom for the condition that religious practices must be observed in the private realm.

Marx and Nietzsche's discourses are not about secularization. However, their ideas shattered the mystery of religion. Their analysis of the origin and relevance of religion destroyed the "iron curtain" that protects the Truth, and crushed the metaphysical and

⁷¹ Charles Taylor, "Why We Need a Radical Redefinition of Secularism" in *The Power of Religion in the Public Sphere*, Judith Butler et al., eds. Eduardo Mendieta and Jonathan Van Antwerpen (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 36.

spiritual foundation of the Truth. Their ideas contributed to the wide array of knowledge that challenged the validity of religious Truth, and that pulverized the Truth into truths. The pulverization of Truth paved the way for the rise of secular principles of separation of church and state and religious freedom. These principles give the modern society the freedom to believe or not to believe, treat all religious truths as equal, and see all religions believe in one Supreme Being but profess that belief in different ways and traditions. The principles of separation of church and state and religious freedom are based on the view that religious truth is not universally valid, and there is no means to determine its universal validity. Its validity can only be ascertained by the believers and by those who belong to the same faith community. Hence, religious truth should not be imposed; and for those who believe, they must practice that faith in private and should not bring that faith in the realm of public discourse in respect for those who believe differently and for those who do not believe at all.

Understanding of the secularism and the ideas behind it is important particularly for believers. So that they would know how to deal with it. They would know how to respond to this phenomenon that is creeping into institutions particularly educational institutions that belong even to religion. Secularism is appealing for it espouses the principles of freedom, equality and fraternity that are so close to the heart of modern man. These principles are not only observed in politics and economics but also influenced institutions' treatment of religion and individuals' view of religious truth.

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