

## The Greek Review of Social Research

Vol 162 (2024)

162



Kirkpatrick, G., McMylor, P. and Fadaee, S. (Eds.) (2022). *Marxism, religion, and emancipatory politics*. Palgrave Macmillan (XVII+ 269 pages). ISBN: 978-3-030-91641-1.

[https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-91642-8\\_4](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-91642-8_4)

George Gotsis

doi: [10.12681/grsr.36731](https://doi.org/10.12681/grsr.36731)

Copyright © 2024, George Gotsis



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/).

### To cite this article:

Gotsis, G. (2024). Kirkpatrick, G., McMylor, P. and Fadaee, S. (Eds.) (2022). *Marxism, religion, and emancipatory politics*. Palgrave Macmillan (XVII+ 269 pages). ISBN: 978-3-030-91641-1. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-91642-8\\_4](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-91642-8_4). *The Greek Review of Social Research*, 162, 143–149. <https://doi.org/10.12681/grsr.36731>

## BOOK REVIEW

Kirkpatrick, G., McMyler, P. and Fadaee, S. (Eds.) (2022). *Marxism, religion, and emancipatory politics*. Palgrave Macmillan (XVII+ 269 pages). ISBN: 978-3-030-91641-1. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-91642-8\\_4](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-91642-8_4).



This edited volume evaluates the controversial relationship between Marxism and religion by considering both Marxism's conception of religion and the potential religious dimensions of Marxism. The book is intended to denote the shortcomings of a superficial understanding of Marxist tradition as merely refuting religion both in theory and practice. The collection of essays is divided into two parts: the first part examines the theoretical debate on the relationship between Marxism and various streams of religious thought, to identify points of convergence and divergence between them. Contributions in the second part aim to demonstrate the ongoing reception of Marxist ideas in different parts of the world. These essays explore the contribution of religious beliefs to the politics of emancipation, viewed through the lens of the Marxist explanation of religion's resilience in the context of advanced global capitalism. Despite the emphasis on the intersection between Marxism and religion in a variety of societal contexts, we should not ignore that Marx rejected religion outright, advocating certain plausible reasons, among which the alliance of church, state and dominant economic groups that ultimately served elite interests.

The chapters in Part I are primarily theoretical and centred on Marxism concerning the historical function of religion. After an introductory chapter, Graeme Kirkpatrick in ch. 2 focuses on Marx's reception of the category of critique from his Hegelian predecessors. This involves a discussion of the influence on Marx by Hegel, Bruno Bauer, Moses Hess, Feuerbach, as well as that of Heinrich Heine and Kant. Critique of religious authority includes an emphasis on human freedom, the relation between moral and political progress, and the centrality of ethical community to realizing moral

emancipation. Employing a genealogical perspective on critique grounded in Foucauldian thought, Kirkpatrick argues that Marx appropriated a philosophical practice to transform it into a means devoted to class struggle. Marx's notion is centred upon anticipating liberation rather than bearing witness to the redemptive value of suffering (pp. 33-37).

In ch. 3 Peter Manley Scott investigates Marx's early writings to identify how his reading of Feuerbach's critique of Hegel stimulated him to adopt a new philosophical position. Marx moves beyond Feuerbach to recommend action in the world, connecting his ideas with social agency aimed at building community out of otherwise 'pointless humans' (p. 42). Scott contends that the problem with capitalist origins is not that they are *indeterminate* but rather *overdeterminate*. In this view, Marx's theory requires something like the *predeterminate* of religious thought according to which social criticism and social action are motivated by 'the beyond' and the 'more than' (p. 55).

Peter McMyler in ch.4 draws on Alastair MacIntyre's view of Marx's position as fragmented between *its claims to scientificity* on one hand, and *its call to action* in the name of an ethical imperative on the other (p. 65). Drawing on axiological sociology, which treats the history of values as disentangled from reality in the long term, McMyler advances the idea of delving into a sociological reading of Marx's apocalypticism, according to which the idea of revolution is an immanent necessity of reality itself. The author infers that "if Marxism is already deeply indebted to at least one of the great world religions, a sensitively reflexive Marxism will both understand itself better and perhaps expect to find some common ground with what it might have previously viewed with only suspicion" (p. 75).

Marx is committed to the ideal of advancing critique through repudiation of religion, applying the category of critique to other historical impediments to human emancipation, thus deconstructing socially efficacious illusions, such as religion. Reformulating these premises, James Mark Shields in the first essay of Part II argues for an intimate affinity between Marx's reflection and that of political Buddhism in early 20<sup>th</sup> century China. The author introduces the idea of Buddhist socialism with Chinese characteristics, drawing on Buddhist theodicy of suffering, which he depicts as a specific type of alienation (pp. 91-92), reinforced by structures of domination that perpetuate human exploitation. Normative principles such as egalitarianism and justice originate in Buddhist teachings, whereas in Marxism "equality and injustice are secondary manifestations of the deeper problems brought forth by capitalist economics and bourgeois ideology" (p. 99). The author

extrapolates the conclusion that experiments in radical economic reform denote a significant dimension in Buddhist political protest, thus raising the potential of untapped theoretical possibilities in Socially Engaged Buddhism (p. 100), a movement endorsing responsibility and sustainability ideals (Gotsis, 2023).

Simin Fadaee in ch. 6 explores the entwinement between Marxist and religious ideals in Iran. Focusing on the work of Ali Shariati (1933-1977), a forerunner of the 1979 Iranian Revolution, Fadaee underscores that Ali Shariati appropriated valuable Marxist insights on the historical process and the fundamental structures of capitalist society. Shariati charges Marxism with an apparent neglect of cultural values that determine the meaning-making process in indigenous contexts. The diffusion of capitalist consumerism in these societal contexts was challenged by proponents of a dynamic synthesis between Marxism and Political Islam (pp. 111-115). These ideas resonate well with a critique of capitalist exploitation, reflected in an ongoing articulation of Shiism's discourses that target Western cultural dominance.

Chinese Marxism culminated in the communists' rise to power in 1949 which made Marxism the official state ideology. Cui Wenxing's contribution to this volume (ch. 7) demonstrates that, albeit we would expect a paucity of pragmatic grounds for converging with systems of indigenous thought, Chinese dominant ideology was shaped by its encounter with Confucianism. In as early as the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, Marxism was embraced by intellectuals with a Confucian background, such as Liang Qichao, Jiang Kanghu and Sun Yat-sen, who advocated the ideal of *Great Harmony* and *Evening the Poor and Rich* to disseminate the Marxist tenets to Chinese people. The persistence and resilience of Confucian doctrines is explained by the fact that Confucianism is much closer to political religion, a type of *religion civile*, encompassing an administrative philosophy embedded in social conventions and ritual order. Socialism diverges from Confucianism in that it privileges contradiction over social harmony (pp. 127-130). Yet, socialism with Chinese characteristics is feasible, denoting an inclusive notion intended to accommodate competing values: Western philosophy, socialist ideals, and ancient wisdom (p. 134).

Obed Frausto and Jason Powell in ch.8 examine the evolution of liberation theology in Latin America, focusing on the Zapatista movement of Mayan people. The authors hold the view that political struggle can be envisioned through the lenses of the experiences of indigenous people who define emancipation by shaping autonomous territories that resist

the imposition of neo-liberal precepts and conserve culturally embedded values, irreducible to class-based forms of conflict. The authors identify in the work of Columbian priest Camilo Torres a Marxist imperative to revolt that fits well with a Christian assessment of the situation of the needy in Latin America so that refraining from social protest is deemed an indulgence to sin.

Kathleen Nadeau in ch. 9 explores the impact of liberation theology-inspired social movements in the Philippines, arguing that the model of bottom-up development pursued by the Basic Christian Community (BCC) farmers affected their religious commitment, shaping attitudes that transcend ritual observance. She thus demonstrated that these religious initiatives emphasized “the full range of human and environmental well-being that included satisfying work, harmonious relationships, a safe and beautiful environment, caring for mother earth...as stewards of creation” (p. 173).

Nadim Mirshak in ch. 10 employs the case of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt to indicate how religion serves as an instrument of popular grievance against prevailing political conditions. Despite a superficial resemblance to emancipatory movements, this religious group never warranted the optimistic assessment adopted by some Marx-inspired scholars. As an allegedly oppositional coalition deeply rooted in Egyptian society, the Brotherhood’s emergence as an influential force in the wake of the 2011 uprising lent support to a Marxist reading of the group’s aims, analyzed in Gramscian terms as capitalizing on a counterhegemonic legacy. The author convincingly argues that this endeavour was doomed to failure because the Brotherhood envisioned social change through the lenses of a degenerating Gramscianism, lacking a hegemonic project and succumbing to revolutionary inertia (pp. 194-195).

Joe Hayns in ch. 11 discusses the Rif social protest movement which erupted in Morocco in 2014. Rif is perceived as an emancipatory political movement that draws on religion to prevent its opponents from condemning it as irreligious, yet without adopting a fundamentalist rhetoric which would make it vulnerable to the offense of religious extremism. Rif is typical of ‘popular Islam’, a social movement drawing on indigenous traditions as a condition of participation in the discursive enactment of politics yet refraining from adhering to a set of doctrinal commitments. Employing the Althusserian concept of *overdetermination*, Hayns posits that Rif occupies a space so far neglected by Marxist theory, that of movements motivated by a specific articulation of religious and secular ideals in the pursuit of an emancipatory agenda that is both *context-specific* and *overtly socialist*.

The author concludes that “in the case of the Movement of Rif too, neither accusations of religious reaction nor an assumption of religion’s absence is adequate” (p. 217).

James Bradbury in ch.12 discusses the Indian left’s endeavor to reconcile competing demands, those of Marxist identity and the influential role of Hindu beliefs in current Indian politics. While Indian Marxism’s focus on secular aspirations was consonant with the dominant trends of postcolonial narratives, the rise of Hindu nationalism urged certain Communist politicians to disclose their religious affiliations as part of an effective electoral strategy. The author concludes that “any effort at co-opting Hinduism towards left-wing political ends will be seen as yet more electoral opportunism until and unless a deeper theoretical engagement with the religion takes place. This would allow for a cross-fertilization of ideas, a sincere appropriation of theological concepts that are congruent with-and a rejection of social models that cannot coexist with-the political projects of the Left” (p. 238).

Pritam Singh in the concluding chapter examines the relationship between Marxism and Sikhism, identifying egalitarian prospects in the Sikh tradition, mainly in Punjab. Singh argues that these core religious tenets facilitated a strong affinity of Sikh ideals with Marxism, reflected in the active participation of Sikh followers in the Party, fighting British colonial rule. In the aftermath of the 1947 events, however, the post-colonial ideological trends perceived religious beliefs as a threat to community unity. India’s secularism impeded social representations of the intersection between Sikhism and radical politics, yet environmental and equality concerns in Sikh thinking cannot be left unnoticed by Marxist theory. The author posits that “only if the Left in Punjab were able to have a deeper understanding of the role of religion in people’s lives not as ‘false consciousness’ but as rooted in practices of care and human solidarity-that the Left would be able to form more principled alliances with the adherents of the Sikh faith” (p. 258).

In sum, the book underscores the need for further, meticulous study of critical issues in the Marxist approach to religion. In an era in which institutional religion through established monopolies in competitive religious markets declines, individualized conglomerate religion flourishes, engendered by a generic belief that defies ritual practice. The various entwinements of religious and political discourses worldwide necessitate fresh insights into Marx’s theory of religion. Marx transformed the encompassing notion of religion, which was predominant in this era, by

making it a private affair, seeking to challenge the theological justification of the Prussian state. In his critique of religion, Marx employs the concept of an abstract and isolated individual, whilst, in his critique of politics, Marx posits that the separation of civil society from the state leads to a divide of individuals into burghers and citizens: only the genuine emancipation of humanity could ultimately outweigh such fragmented identities (Li, 2023). Among the subsequent Marxists, Gramsci did not discredit religion as a mere illusion, recognizing it as a source of a sense-making process that, albeit ambivalent in principle, informed people's worldviews. Rejecting the reductionism of orthodox Marxism, Gramsci treated religion as an active form of experiencing historical reality, thus conceptualizing the philosophy of praxis as a hybrid secular religion.

Undoubtedly, the book's innovative contribution to the extant literature resonates with current attempts to reframe the dialectical tensions between religious and Marxist ideals in certain indigenous contexts. For instance, Raza (2022) reconstructs the life of Sufi Sibghatullah Mazari, an influential communist from Pakistan who equated Sufism with Marxism. Sibghatullah incorporated mystical Marxism into his political practice, claiming that both Maoism and Sufism shared universalist elements that allowed him to encapsulate these traditions, on the grounds of the concept of truth (*Haqiqat*).

Worthy to mention two additional cases that substantiate the discussion on the intersection between religious and socialist identities in indigenous societal contexts. *First*, Liang Shuming's (1893-1988) work, especially *Renxin yu rensheng (Human Mind and Human Life)* published in 1984, is permeated by a conspicuous endorsement of Marxism and a sincere anticipation of communism. Liang's Marxism presupposes a synergistic relationship with Confucianism and Buddhism, seeking a reconciliation between these streams of thought. Confucianism is deemed an ethical religion which harmonizes collective and individual needs, whilst Buddhism allows humans to reach transcendence through contemplation. In so doing, he highlighted the concept of '*zijue*' (self-consciousness), a component of the human heart-mind (*renxin*) as underlying spiritual liberty that erodes social differentiation (Chan, 2023). Liang Shuming in his 'Fundamentals of Chinese Culture' (*Zhongguo wenhua yaoyi*), posits that traditional Chinese society was an ethic-based society to which conventional Marxist categories of religious criticism hardly apply.

*Second*, ideas of Buddhist socialism are traced back to the political activity of a few Japanese scholars in the 1880s. One typical example

is the Eastern Socialist Party (Tōyō Shakaitō, founded by Tarui Tōkichi (1850-1922) in 1882. Though the party was vehemently persecuted by the government, its intellectual legacy reveals a tension experienced in attempts to reconcile political emancipation with fidelity to traditional cultural roots. The “draft of the party’s regulations” (*Tōyō Shakaitō tōsoku sōan*), written by Tarui, is a typical case of social experiments in radical Buddhism. The ensuing tensions stem from embedding Marxism in contexts dominated by values of social harmony, an endeavour frequently accompanied by an appeal to the emperor as a benevolent guardian of the social welfare of the Japanese people (Shields, 2019).

Prof. George Gotsis

Department of the History and Philosophy of Science  
National and Kapodistrian University of Athens

#### REFERENCES

- Chan, Y.F. (2023). Liang under Mao: The reconciliation of Confucianism and Buddhism with Marxist ideology. In T. Meynard and P. Major (Eds.), *Dao Companion to Liang Shuming's Philosophy* (pp. 225-254). Springer.
- Gotsis, G. (2023). Buddhist economics: Philosophical premises and environmental policy implications. In N. Singh, M.C. Vu, I. Chu and N. Burton (Eds.), *Faith traditions and sustainability: New views and practices for environmental protection*. Springer.
- Li, Z. (2023). *The concept of the individual in the thought of Karl Marx*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Raza, S. (2022). The Sufi and the Sick: Theorizing Mystical Marxism in rural Pakistan. *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 64 (2), pp. 300-334.
- Shields, J.M. (2019). Carrying Buddha into the streets: Buddhist socialist thought in modern Japan. In G. Kopf (Ed.), *Dao Companion to Japanese Buddhist Philosophy* (pp. 255-285). Springer.

This paper is an integral part of EU ERASMUS+ Project ETHICS4CHALLENGES (E4C): *Innovative Ethics Education for Major Technological and Scientific Challenges*.