



FUDMA International Journal of Social Sciences (FUDIJOSS)

Vol. 5, No. 2, September, 2025

ISSN: 2735-9522 (Print) ISSN :2735-9530 (Online)



FUDMA International Journal of Social Sciences (FUDIJOSS), Volume 5, No. 2, September, 2025

**A Publication of
The Faculty of Social
Sciences, Federal
University Dutsin-Ma,
Katsina State,
Nigeria**

ISSN: 2735-9522 (Print)
2735-9530 (Online)



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Publication Fee

Publication fee is ₦30,000 or 150 (USD).

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Annual subscriptions (2023): Nigeria, ₦10,000 (Individuals), ₦15,000 (Institutions).

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KARL MARX'S CONCEPTION OF RELIGION AND NIGERIAN SUBSIDY REGIME: ANALYZING THE INTERCONNECTION AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC RELEVANCE

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Abstract

The abrupt removal of fuel subsidy has brought excruciating pains and sufferings to ordinary Nigerians in all ramifications of life. The socio-economic sufferings accruing from it has further deepened the already existing socio-economic quagmire bedeviling the country since independence as a result of bad leadership. However, the government instead of being decisive in providing lasting solutions has resorted to using religious rhetoric as a tool for social control over the poor. This paper examined the extent to which government's use of religious terms like hope, patience, faith, and sacrifice in Presidential addresses aligns with Marx's conceptions of religion. This is crucial because critics of the policy of subsidy removal in Nigeria have often turned blind fashion to how government's approach on the subsidy removal aligns with classical socio-economic theories like that of Max Weber and Karl Marx. Using the methodology of desk research and critical analysis, the paper argued that the strategy of government in addressing the socio-economic hardships and pains of the people strongly validates Marx's conception of religion as opium of the masses. Moreover, the citizens' approach to see religion as a temporary sigh of relief or escape from the socio-economic hardships and injustices in Nigeria today validates Marx's conceptions of religion. The paper concludes that the actions and inactions of government and citizens with regards to subsidy removal demonstrate how economic conditions could influence religious beliefs and vice versa.

Keywords: Karl Marx, conception of religion, subsidy removal, government, and Nigeria

Introduction

Nigeria is undoubtedly one of the most endowed countries with abundant human and natural resources that can promote sustainable socio-economic development (Koko, 2019). In fact,

records from the United Nations' population projections, put Nigeria's current population estimate at 216.7 million people, with over 55.3%, that is, 117 million of the population belonging to the most active age group of 15-64 years (Global Data on Nigeria's Population Distribution by Age, 2021). Arguably, this is a huge human resource that if properly harnessed, could steer the country on the path of sustainable development as the examples in China, U.S. and India have shown (Koko & Joseph, 2023). Unfortunately, due to protracted bad leadership occasioned by endemic corruption, coupled with weak policies, which characterize the country, from Independence till date, Nigeria is now classified as one of the countries with the highest rate of poor and unemployed people in the world. A report by The World Poverty Clock shows that over 86.9 million Nigerians are living in extreme poverty, thus making it the world poverty capital (Kazeem, 2018). With such huge population under extreme poverty, it means that about four in every ten Nigerians are living below the poverty line according to The World Bank. Also, records from the National Bureau of Statistics indicate that Nigeria's misery index, that is, people unemployed and those experiencing inflation put together increased from 30.5 percent in the third quarter of 2023 to 36.9 percent in the first quarter of 2024, thereby making Nigeria, again one of the countries with the highest misery index in the world, with many Nigerians currently experiencing what may be fittingly referred to as cost of living crisis.

Regrettably, while this precarious socio-economic situation continues to pose serious concern to the ordinary Nigerian, the complete removal of petroleum subsidy by the current Administration in 2023 has aggravated and worsens the situation thereby making life most unbearable in the country. Perhaps, most worrisome in all this, is the fact that the government instead of being decisive in providing lasting solutions to the widespread economic quagmire has resorted in using religious virtues such as hope, patience and sacrifice as tools to pacify the poor masses to accept the untold hardship accruing from it. Arguably, this strategy of government as it were appears to validate Karl Marx's socio-economic conception of religion as *opium of the masses*. Therefore, using the methodology of critical analysis, the paper seeks to examine the apparent nexus between Marx's socio-economic views of religion against the backdrop of the current subsidy regime in Nigeria. This is crucial because critics of the policy of subsidy removal in Nigeria have often turned blind fashion to how government's explanation on this issue aligns with classical socio-economic theories like that of Marx.

Theoretical Conception of Religion

The term religion is difficult to confine into a single definition because it means different things to different scholars. However, there are two basic theoretical conceptions about religion that have emerged overtime. The first is the *substantive* conception while the second is *functional* conception. First, the term substantive has been defined by the *New International Webster's Comprehensive Dictionary of the English Language* (2010) to mean the following things: (i) something expressive of or denoting existence. This means that religion when used in the substantive sense would carry the notion of something expressive of the existence of gods, God or a transcendent Being; (ii) something having reality which means that religion in the substantive sense connotes the idea of something tangible and not an abstract concept. In this case, it is largely connected with human experience and feelings; and (ii) something being an essential part of or constituent. This implies that religion when understood in substantive terms connotes something inherent in all human beings and human society.

Consequently, the substantive conceptions regard religion simply as a system of beliefs or a philosophy which seeks to understand the universe around us (Iyer, 2016:398). For example, Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, the famous Indian philosopher, in his 1928 book, *The Religion We*



Need, wrote that “religion is an expression of the spiritual experience of a race, a record of its social evolution, an integral element of the society in which it is found” (Radhakrishnan, 1928:25). The implication of Radhakrishnan’s definition is that religion is an indispensable part of every human society because it is what gives meaning and identity to a race or community of people. But more than that, religion is also an all-encompassing phenomenon consisting of spiritual, psychological, social and cultural aspects. And in this sense, religion is inherently a corporate element of every human society.

In a different development, Eliade (2010) who approached it from a more specific sense conceives it as a unified system of beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a church. It should be stated that while this definition is insightful. The problem with this kind of conception however, is that it tends to construe religion strictly from a Christian perspective without taken into cognizance the existence of other religions. For example, aside Christianity, other religions namely Judaism, Islam, African Traditional Religion (ATR), Hinduism, etc., also have their moral systems as well. Therefore, simply defining religion as a unified system of beliefs and practices culminating into single moral community called Church is not only misleading but problematic. Ordinarily, it is expected that in a society of multiplicity of religions, any ideal conception of religion should be more inclusive than exclusive. But as it is, this definition portrays an exclusivistic position which is intolerant and not healthy for any religiously pluralistic society.

Another interesting perspective of the substantive aspect of religion is given by Emile Durkheim (1947), who simply describes it as a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things. These sacred things in his view are things set apart and forbidden and beliefs and practices which unite into a single moral community and adhered to by members of the society. One significant thing about this conception of religion is that it sees religion not as a set of beliefs and practices built around the concept of a Supreme Being, but as something akin to sacred objects which invariably refer to religious objects, symbols, and totems as the case may be. In this sense, Durkheim attempts to put forward a polytheistic view of religion in which everything matters (animate and inanimate) and which possibly translates to belief in gods or God. Suffice it to state however that while his view opens another understanding about this complex phenomenon called religion, the difficulty with this sort of conception is that it attempts to overgeneralize the real object of religion, which in the Christian view and a few other religions are God or the Supreme Being and not just anything sacred as envisaged by him. Similarly, the very fact that Durkheim’s view restricts the scope of religion to beliefs and practices about sacred things apparently implies that he spiritualizes religion and fails to capture the psychological, social, economic and cultural aspects of it as well.

The last insightful substantive definition of religion for the purpose of this paper which tends to expand its scope beyond the realm of mere beliefs and practices of sacred things is the one given by Anyacho (1994). According to him, religion is the human enterprise that involves belief or worship of God or gods believed to reside in certain objects of experience. The implication is that apart from beliefs and practices centered on sacred things, religion also involves human responses towards the object of worship namely gods or God. Moreover, these human responses - worship may be voluntary in some cases. However, in other cases it may be very compelling and demanding absolute surrendering. Madu (1996) observes that it creates the very consciousness of dependence on a transcendent being and the very propensity or inclination to exhibit cult or worship. In essence, it is this consciousness of dependence on a transcendent being and the demand for absolute surrendering embedded in religion that ultimately culminate into building of worship centers, houses, temples, churches and alters.



Unlike the substantive conception, the functional conception of religion understands religion differently. The term *functional* as defined by the same *New International Webster's Comprehensive Dictionary* has to do with the specific, natural or proper action that belongs to an agent. It is one's appropriate or assigned duty. Therefore, functional has to do with something belonging to the proper office or work of an agent or agency (2010:512). The implication of this definition to religion is that the functional aspect of religion concerns itself with the role religion plays in human life and the society.

Iyer cited in Koko (2020) believes that the functional definitions pay attention to what religion does for people in terms of its role in their lives or supporting them either socially or psychologically (Iyer, 2016:398). This means that religion is not only a micro entity- that is, it is not just about beliefs and practices but also functions as a macro entity- that is, it concerns itself with molding of behaviour, character, and relationship which eventually culminates in maintaining the moral equilibrium of society.

It is against the backdrop of this relational function of religion that Okwueze (2003:3) conceives it as a regulated pattern of life of a people in which experience, beliefs and knowledge are reflected in man's conception of himself in relation to others, his social world, the physical as well as the metaphysical world. The implication of Okwueze's view is that religion is an all-encompassing phenomenon that involves man's total contribution to society. It serves as a mirror from which man evaluates himself whether he is on the right tract or not. In this sense, religion plays a crucial role in the sustenance of political, cultural, social and economic development of any society. Hence, religion serves as a regulatory principle under which the moral equilibrium of society is being maintained.

This is crucial because in almost all religions of the world, there are moral principles enshrined in them which are useful in coordinating and guiding the day to day activities of individuals in the society. Some of these regulatory principles of religion have been itemized by Ugwu (1999:2), to include a code of ethical behaviour; the outward act or form by which men indicate their recognition of the existence of God or of gods having power over their destiny, to whom obedience, service and honour are due; the feeling or expression of human love, fear or awe of some super human and over-ruling power, whether by profession of belief, by observances of rites and ceremonies or by the conduct of life.

Hinging on this positive role of religion, Boughet (1954:154) has remarked that religion is so crucial that even a selective or obsolete scheme of religion will serve the individual better than none at all. What this attempts to convey is that this phenomenon called religion, both at the micro and macro levels is indispensable to the development of human society be it political, social, cultural or economic. Thus it could be argued judging from the above inferences that religion is an integral human experience which plays both substantive and functional roles not only in the lives of the individuals but also in all that happen in human society. Suffice it to state also that the dominant overriding interest in all these conceptions as Omoregbe (1999:3) observes, is that it clearly reveals that through religion a link is established not only between God and man but also between man to man. In the next section, we will examine this relationship more closely with specific reference to how religion and the economy relates.

Theoretical Underpinnings of the Interconnection between Religion and Economy

Contrary to religion, the term "economy" may be defined in both general and specific ways. Generally economy from the dictionary definition refers to "any practical system in which

means are adjusted to ends, especially in the natural world” (2010:400). This general definition suggests that there are different types of economy namely: political economy, domestic economy, divine economy, business economy, etc. However, in a more specific sense, the same dictionary defines it as “the practical adjustment, organization, or administration of affairs or resources, especially of industrial resources of a state” (2010:400). Given both general and specific understanding, Koko (2020) has observed that the issue of economy has to do with the overall management of all available resources of a state or country with a view to achieving her set goals.

The interconnection or relationship between religion and economy has been variously theorized by scholars who sternly believe that one significantly influences the other. Two of the most outstanding promoters of this view whose works relate to this current work are Max Weber and Karl Marx. However, since the later would be extensively discussed in the section following, we shall only give attention in this section to the former. Max Weber, a German sociologist and political economist whom Mitzman (2023), refers to as one of the principal forefathers of modern social sciences was one of the earliest scholars to identify the relationship between religion and the economy. Oko and Koko (2024) observe that unlike the denigrators of religion who conceived religion as an oppressive tool of the wealthy class on the poor, Weber was a rehabilitator of religion and a key proponent of methodological anti-positivism. Rehabilitators of religion are those who conceive religion as playing a positive role in human life and society, while the anti-positivists are those who believe in the truth claim of religion despite lack of verifiable evidence (Koko, 2020).

Weber’s significant contribution on the nexus between religion and economy is found in his masterpiece, *Theory of Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1904), translated into English by Talcott Parsons in 1930. According to him Weber, Western capitalism developed as a result of the Protestant work ethic which allowed for pursuit of individual’s spiritual aspiration- *otherworldly* alongside one’s mundane affairs- *this worldly* (Crossman, 2019). Weber arrived at this conclusion because he observed that Protestant countries gained economic prominence over Catholic countries following the aftermaths of the Reformation. He also observed that in countries with different religions, the most successful business leaders tended to be Protestants especially from Calvinist and Puritan denominations (Oko and Koko, 2024). It is worthy of note that prior to the Reformation, Christian religious devotion had tilted towards a complete rejection of mundane affairs – *this worldly* including economic pursuits. However, after the Reformation, some Christian denominations notably Calvinism and Puritanism accepted worldly activities and the rational pursuit of economic gain as part of the life required in the world to come – *otherworldly* (Oko and Koko, 2024). Weber observed that believers in these Pentecostal denominations expressed their piety towards God through hard work in conjunction with their achievement in secular vocation / calling. Hence, for him, the Protestant ethic, while promoting the pursuit of economic gain, relinquished all semblances of hedonistic pleasure. As a result, believers were motivated to work hard, become successful in business and reinvest their profits rather than spend them on frivolous pleasures and it was this ethic that gave rise to what is now referred to as capitalism (See the LibreTexts Libraries). It is important to state as Crossman (2019) observed that even after religion became less important in Western society, these norms of hard work and frugality remained, and continued to encourage individuals to pursue material wealth alongside religiosity.

Following Weber (1904)’s discovery above, two main theories have emerged on the interconnection between religion and economy namely *religious economics* and *economics of*

religion, respectively. The point of departure between the two is that religious economics concerns itself with how religion exerts reasonable amount of influence on economic behaviours or attitudes (Iyer, 2016:397). In other words, the central idea in religious economics is on how religious competition, religious regulation, new religious movements, and theological and institutional propagation of religious faith impact either directly or indirectly on economic behaviours and attitudes.

In contradistinction, *economics of religion* interest is vested in using the tools and methods of economics to study religion as a dependable variable or to study religion as an in-dependable variable on other socio-economic outcomes. Economics of religion draws heavily upon ideas in public economics, labour economics, industrial organization, development economics, and international trade, and uses tools developed in game theory and econometrics (Iyer, 2016:397).

The overall benefits accruing from both theories are multifaceted. First, both theories can be useful in evaluating the vital role culture - particularly the role religion plays when explaining the economic growth of different countries in the world (Landes, 1995; Norris and Inglehart, 2004). Second, both theories provide a lead way on how economic and statistical tools can be used to evaluate the role of religion in society (Iyer, 2016:396). Third, they can also cast light on the economics of nonmarket behaviour illustrating the role that norms, values, social capital and spiritual capital may play in influencing human behaviours by affecting both beliefs and actions (Iyer, 2016:396). Fourth, they show how culture more broadly, whether through religion or other kinds of cultural beliefs, can affect economic systems (Iyer, 2016:396). Fifth, scholars like Friedman (2008), and Bowles (1995) observed that economists should be concerned about the moral consequences of economic growth when dealing with issues of the economy of any country. Sixth, they encourage human capital formation and literacy, all of which contribute to economic growth. For example, since spiritual grace from religion is attained by demonstrating temporal success in one's calling through diligence, discipline, self-denial, and thrift, the Protestant ethic promoted a work ethic that increased savings, capital accumulation, entrepreneurial activity, and investment (Iyer, 2016:407).

Aside all these, Woodberry (2012:244) has added that conversionary Protestants influenced the development of democracy around the world because they preached principles particularly things that spurred democracy, including liberty, education, diligence, etc. which eventually paved the way for the success of democratic institutions. In a related development, Friedman (2011:166) believed the evolution of economics as we know it today was influenced profoundly by changes in religious beliefs in the times in which Adam Smith lived. While Warner (1993:1049) averred that in the United States, organized religion flourished in an open market and that this idea was prompted by the fact that societal modernization went hand in hand with religious mobilization. Suffice it to state that the Protestant ethic and the theories accruing from it are very important in understanding the dynamics of the relationship between religion and economy in any country of the world.

Karl Marx's Conception of Religion

As earlier indicated, Karl Marx was one of the most outstanding protagonists of political and social economy and a stern critic of western capitalism and religion. Unlike his counterpart, Max Weber who was a rehabilitator of religion, Marx on his part fittingly falls within the categorization of denigrators of religion. To be very clear, denigrators of religion are those who conceived religion as an oppressive tool used by the wealthy class to subjugate the poor into

position of permanent control. Denigrators see religion as playing no positive role in human life and society, instead, serves as a tool for oppression and social exclusion (Wotogbe-Weneka, 2013).

Born in Rhineland, Germany in 1818 to devoted diaspora Jewish parents, he became educated in law and philosophy at the universities of Bon and Berlin, respectively, and became acquainted with the works of Hegel which later had significant influence on his conception of religion. Suffice it to observe that though Marx's views on economy, society and religion are inexhaustible and widely discussed by scholars of divergent human endeavours, it is appropriate here to simply summarize his central views on religion as it relates to this work using the following themes:

Religion as a form of social control:

The first conception of Marx on religion is that religion is an oppressive tool used by the ruling class to maintain social control over the poor and this thought is rooted in his critique of capitalism and ideology. Consequently, in his work, *Introduction to A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, Marx (1844) argued that religion serves as a means of social control, legitimizing the dominant ideology and power structures of society. Marx notes that religion often legitimizes inequalities in the society by justifying social hierarchies and inequalities while promising rewards in the afterlife for suffering in this life. But more than that, it also distracts people from material conditions by diverting the attention of citizens from material struggles and injustices, focusing instead on spiritual salvation. By so doing, religion tends to project false consciousness by obscuring the true nature of social relations and class exploitation. Giving this role of religion, it could be said that Marx's critique highlights the complex relationship between religion, power, and ideology, encouraging critical examination of how religious beliefs and institutions intersect with social and economic systems. Above all, Marx saw religion as a tool used by the ruling class to maintain power and control over the working class who rather than confront the ills of society often prefer to use it as a tool for temporal relief.

Religion as a tool for social and political alienation/exclusion:

The second conception of religion by Marx is the one that sees it as a tool for societal and political alienation / exclusion. This perception is rooted in his well celebrated critique of Hegel's philosophy and his analysis of capitalist societies but which later was published posthumously in his honour in 1932 by Institute of Marxism-Leninism, Moscow, as *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*. In it, Marx vigorously argued that religion alienates people from their true human potentials and from each other on three different fronts. One, it alienates people especially the poor from societal and political power structures by diverting their attention from earthly struggles to spiritual concerns, distracting from material conditions and class exploitation; second, religion alienates people by often legitimizing existing power structures, reinforcing social hierarchies and inequalities; and three, it alienates by creating a false sense of unity among people thereby masking underlying class divisions and conflicts.

It is generally believed that in Marx's concept of alienation, three paradigms of social alienation are possible namely: *alienation from labour* in which people become disconnected from their work, thus losing control and meaning; *alienation from humanity* in which people are reduced to mere commodities; and *alienation from reality* in which religion offers a fake sense of comfort and meaning. In all, Marx saw religion simply as a coping mechanism for the pain and disconnection caused by alienation. However, this coping mechanism in his estimation masks

underlying issues and prevents true emancipation. This is because most religious people often focus attention only on spiritual salvation and neglect their material and social circumstances (Marx, 1932).

Religion as a masquerading ideology:

Marx's third conception of religion generally describes religion as a form of ideology that distorts reality and masks the true nature of social relations. This view of religion as a distorting ideology is enshrined in his masterpiece, *The German Ideology*, published posthumously in 1932 by Institute of Marxism-Leninism, Moscow. Here Marx strongly conceives religion in three concrete ways namely, as a masquerading ideology that often *masks reality*. This implies that religion often distorts people's understanding of the world, hiding the true nature of social relations and class exploitation. Moreover, as a distorting ideology, religion also *legitimizes power*. In other words, religion often justifies and legitimizes the dominant class's power and interests. Thirdly, as a masquerading ideology, religion creates *false consciousness*. This means that religion shapes people's beliefs and values, creating a false sense of reality that obscures the root causes of social problems.

Marx further identified two things that most likely results from this distorting ideology tendencies of religion. On the one hand, it prevents critical thinking in the sense that religion prevents people from critically examining their circumstances. On the other hand, it maintains social control by reinforcing social hierarchies and power structures.

The implication of Marx's view of religion as a distorting ideology is that it can present a distorted view of reality, where the powerful are seen as divinely ordained and the powerless are blamed for their circumstances. Moreover, religion can hold society together by masking underlying conflicts and contradictions. But most regrettably, it can limit human potential for change since it places emphasis on divine authority. Above all, it could be stated that Marx's view of religion as a distorting ideology highlights the complex and multifaceted nature of ideology and its role in shaping society.

Religion as a tool for oppression of the masses:

Perhaps one of the most dominant conceptions of religion by Marx is his stance that *religion is the opium of the people*. By opium of the people, Marx (1844) means that religion numbs pain and suffering by providing a temporary sigh of relief or escape from the hardships and injustices of life instead of giving them courage to confront societal injustices and exploitations of the poor by the ruling class. But more than that it also provides a false sense of comfort and distracts from the root causes of suffering such as exploitation and oppression as well as serves as a tool for social control used to maintain social order and reinforces existing power structures by the political and wealthy class. This widely read conception of religion is captured in his work titled *Introduction to A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right* (1844).

Suffice it to note that the difference between Marx's view of religion as opium of the people, from his earlier views is that here he emphasizes the practical functional role of religion in society, while his earlier views focused on the philosophical and theological aspects of religion. Although, the phrase *opium* is often misunderstood as outright condemnation of religion, it's rather a nuanced critique of religion's role in society, highlighting both its comforting and distracting aspects.

The implication of Marx's view of religion as opium of the people is that he saw religion as a form of escapism, distracting people from the harsh realities of their lives and the need for revolutionary change. Similarly, his view implies that religion can hinder social change by providing a temporary solution to suffering, rather than encouraging people to address the root cause of problems as often the case in most countries of the world (Marx, 1844). In all, his view of religion as the *opium of the people* projects religion in bad light as a tool used for temporary escape or comfort from the hardships or sufferings of life.

Religion as a tool for economic determinism:

Another fascinating conception of Marx about religion is that economic conditions shape religious beliefs and practices. This view is woven into his masterpiece *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1859), Marx argued that economic systems and class relations shape religious beliefs and institutions. But more than that, religion in his view also reflects the material conditions and class struggles of society, often serving the interest of the dominant class.

One important implication that emerges in all this is that religion is not an independent force, but rather a reflection of underlying economic conditions. And by this, religion is an economic concept and not something extraordinary. But aside the fact that religion is an emanation of economic conditions, it is also the offspring of class struggle in the sense that class struggle and economic interests shape religious beliefs and practices. This class struggle is the one which often exist between the poor and the wealthy in the society.

Arguably then, the implications of his view of religion as economic determinism can be summarized into two: one, religion serves the interests of the ruling class on the ground that it helps maintain the power and privilege of the ruling class; and two, changes in economic conditions can lead to changes in religion. And this is possible because as economic conditions and class relations change, religious beliefs and institutions may also evolve or adapt as the case may be.

In the light of this argument, it could be stated unequivocally that Marx's view of religion as economic determinism underscores the complex interaction between economic systems, class relations, and religious institutions which many scholars often undermined.

Religion as a reflection of societal contradictions:

The last interesting conception of religion by Marx is that religion is a reflection of societal contradictions. Marx strongly projected this view in his work with F. Engels titled *The Communist Manifesto* (1848). In it, Marx highlighted three reasons why religion fit well into this nomenclature. These reasons include: one, because it exemplifies all conflicts within society such as class struggle, inequality, and alienation; two because it expresses the pain, suffering, and aspirations of people in a society characterized by such contradictions; and three, because it can both legitimize existing power structures and challenge them, depending on the context and interpretation (Marx and Engels, 1848).

The implication of Marx's view of religion as it were is threefold: one, is that religion is shaped by societal context; two, religion can be a site of struggle between different classes, groups and ideologies; and three, understanding religion requires understanding society especially the societal contradictions and conflicts that shape.

Suffice it to say that Marx's view as discussed above highlights the complex relationship between religion and society, emphasizing that religion is not isolated from societal dynamics. Furthermore, his view also suggests that religion can be both a source of comfort and pain. It is also important to add that Marx's perspective of religion encourages a nuanced understanding of religion's complex role in society and for this reason, his approach can be said to be a macro conception of religion since it delves into the functions religion plays in society. But the question to ask in all this is, what socio-economic relevance is there in Marx's conception of religion in Nigeria's subsidy removal regime? The next section seeks to address this question.

Relevance of Marx's Conception of Religion in Nigeria's Subsidy Regime

That Nigeria is a country plagued by acute socio-economic woes is not a matter of mere conjecture but a stark reality judging from the negative socio-economic indices associated with the country since it gained independence in 1960 (Soludo, 2017; Koko, 2020). These negative indices range from negative GDP growth, epileptic power supply, collapse of educational system, unemployment, culture of impunity, insecurity, weak policies, endemic corruption, poor healthcare system, etc. occasioned by bad leadership / governance since independence.

Regrettably, while these precarious socio-economic situations continue to pose serious concern to ordinary Nigerian, the complete removal of petroleum subsidy by the current Administration on the 29 of May, 2023 has aggravated the situation thereby making life most unbearable in the country. For purpose of records, it is important to use the table below to highlight the dynamics of petroleum subsidy regimes in Nigeria over the years.

Table: Showing Summary of Fuel Price Increase (1973-2025)

S/No	President in Power	Year (1973-2025)	Increase Amount (N)	Per (%)
1	Gowon	(1973)	6k to 8.45k	(40.83%)
2	Murtala	(1976)	8.45k to 9k	(6.5%)
3	Obasanjo	(1978)	9k to 15.3k	(70%)
4	Shagari	(1982)	15.3k to 20k	(30.72%)
5	Babangida I	(1986)	20k to 39.5k	(97.5%)
6	Babangida II	(1988)	39.5k to 42k	(6.33%)
7	Babangida III	(1989)	42k to 60k	(42.86%)
8	Babangida IV	(1991)	60k to 70k	(16.67%)
9	Shonekan	(1993)	70k to N5	(614.29%)
10	Abacha I	(1993)	N5 to N3.25k	(35%)
11	Abacha II	(1994)	N3.25k to N15	(361.54%)

12	Abacha III	(1994)	N15 to N11	(26.67%)
13	Abubakar I	(1998)	N11 to N25	(127.27%)
14	Abubakar II	(1999)	N25 to N20	(25%)
15	Obasanjo I	(2000)	N20 to N30	(50%)
16	Obasanjo II	(2000)	N30 to N22	(26.67%)
17	Obasanjo III	(2002)	N22 to N26	(18.18%)
18	Obasanjo IV	(2003)	N26 to N42	(61.54%)
19	Obasanjo V	(2004)	N42 to N50	(19.05%)
20	Obasanjo VI	(2004)	N50 to N65	(30%)
21	Obasanjo VII	(2007)	N65 to N75	(15.39%)
22	Yar' Adua	(2007)	Back to N65	(15.39%)
23	Jonathan I	(2012)	N65 to N141	(116.92%)
24	Jonathan II	(2012)	N141 to N97	(31.21%)
25	Jonathan III	(2015)	N97 to N87	(10.31%)
26	Buhari	(2016)	N87 to N145	(66.67%)
27	Buhari's term	(2015-2023)	N87 to N195	(124%)
28	Tinubu	(2023)	N195 to N557	total
29	Tinubu	(2023)	N557 to N617	total
30	Tinubu	(2023)	N617 – N850	total
31	Tinubu	(2024)	N850 – N999	total
32	Tinubu	(2024)	N990 – N1500	total
33	Tinubu	(2025)	N1500 – N999	total

Source: (adapted from www.Autogirl.ng)

It is clear from the above table that for decades the journey of fuel subsidy has been a very complex and unpredictable one spanning from a humble price of 6 kobo in 1973 to a staggering 999 naira per liter in 2025. Today, the complete removal of petroleum subsidy has brought untold hardship to ordinary Nigerians thereby further complicating the already existing economic woes.

Among the many reasons given to justify such a sudden removal of petroleum subsidy by the current government are that money accruing from it will be channeled to critical sectors such



as education, healthcare, reduce Nigeria's dependence on imported fuel, reduce government borrowing, curb corruption associated with it and rehabilitate domestic refineries (*The Punch*

30th May, 2023). In addition, the government also made promises to provide incentives for large, medium and small scale business, provide CNG engine-driven cars and luxurious buses to ease transportation, introduce cash transfers to the most vulnerable Nigerians, reduce the cost of governance and invest the money accruing from subsidy removal to critical infrastructures like electricity, education, roads, housing, etc.

Regrettably as things turned out to be, these lofty promises have not been kept by the government till date. Instead, money recovered from subsidy removal is being used to purchase SUV's bullet proof cars for National Assembly members, renovation of Vice Presidential Quarters, buying of Presidential Jet, and many other luxuries that have no bearing with improving the socio-economic lives of ordinary Nigerians (Vanguard 15 June, 2025). This has further aggravated the socio-economic pains and misery of majority of citizens. In particular the unprecedented hike in the prices of food items and other essential goods and services across the 36 states of the federation as a result of the petroleum subsidy removal has led to increase in crime rate. There are now more cases of citizens committing suicides, and a surge in criminal activities such as stealing, robbery, prostitution, organ harvesting, kidnapping, child trafficking, ritual killings, money swindling, etc. as means of survival. The situation has also increased the tendency for "Japa Syndrome" (people leaving the country in the quest for greener pasture). Hunger has become a normal way of life and the anger of citizens is brewing across the country.

In response to these socio-economic ills, some Nigerians have resorted to religion as a means of succor rather than confront the situation headlong by calling the government to account. Thus, there are now increase numbers of prayer houses and new religious movements in the country where citizens attend on daily basis to seek divine solution to their socio-economic predicaments thereby affirming Marx (1859)'s thesis that economic conditions shape religious beliefs and practices. Paradoxically, rather than find the expected solution to their prevalent socio-economic predicaments, these religious adherents are on the contrary further exploited by their religious leaders and promised the kind of riches and wealth which Koko (2020) in his work described as *faith-based*, *confession-based* and *giving-based* prosperity. These types of prosperity are so called because they are believed to be divine and attained solely by believing in God, making positive confession and giving of financial gifts (seed of faith) instead of hard work as Koko (2020) observed. Therefore, it could be argued in part that the proliferation of mushroom prayer houses and religious movements in the country today on the one hand, and the flourishing of prosperity gospel in these religious houses on the other hand, are direct consequences of the debilitating socio-economic conditions in the country. In this sense, Marx's conception that religion tends to divert people's attention from earthly struggles to spiritual concerns by distracting them from material conditions and giving room to class exploitation is further reaffirmed (Marx, 1932). Perhaps, most unfortunate is the fact that the emergent religious situation in the country also strongly affirms Marx's proposition - that religion is a form of ideology that distorts reality because it numbs pain and suffering by providing a temporary sigh of relief or escape from the hardships and injustices of life rather than provide courage to confront them. Hence, religion is truly the *opium of the masses* – that is, a tool used by the ruling class to oppress the poor as Marx conceived (Marx, 1932; 1844).

On its part, the government instead of finding ways to alleviate the excruciating widespread socio economic pains and sufferings of the people in the country has also resorted to religious rhetoric as a strategy to further subjugate the people from embarking on possible civil protest. This was clearly manifested in the Presidential addresses of 31st July 2023 and 4th August, 2024

respectively, in which the President used religious statements like *have faith, renewed hope, be patient* and *make sacrifices* as tools to pacify the poor masses to accept the untold hardship as a necessary evil to achieving their desired comfort (Oyeyemi, 2023). Suffice it to state that while several reasons may abound for the use of such religious words by the President, nonetheless they do clearly validate Marx's proposition that religion in most cases usually serve as a tool in the hands of the ruling class to maintain social control over the poor (Marx, 1844; 1859; 1932, etc.). For example, Sharia (n.d) had clarified that in Islamic teachings the word hope which in Arabic is *raja* literally means expectation for something good. In addition, Maghrebi (2024) observed that in Christianity, hope is one of the three theological virtues and refers to a fervent desire and confident expectation. Arguably, the President could have used the term to convey this sense of confident expectation of the good which the removal of petroleum subsidy will eventually bring and by so doing pacified the people to shield their swords. The danger however as Sharia (n.d) warned is that excessive hope without fear may lead to negligence. Aside that Adeyeye (n.d) also remarked that in Christianity, the word patience is a godly virtue that enables us to be tolerant in the midst of trials, difficulties or troubles. In this light, the President could have deployed it in his address to pacify Nigerians to be tolerant to the government notwithstanding the harsh economic realities. The same thing applies to words like faith and sacrifice as well.

In the light of the above inferences, it is reasonable to insist that Marx's conception of religion finds full expression in the current petroleum subsidy removal regime. This is because religion is used as a tool by both the citizens and the government to navigate the socio-economic hardships and sufferings occasioned by the abrupt removal of petroleum subsidy in Nigeria.

Conclusion

The removal of fuel subsidies, without first putting into place economic succor to cushion its effect on the people, ignites inflationary pressures in transportation, cost of food production, food items, etc. The net result is hardship, leading to acute hunger, stress, pains, suffering, increase in crime rate and even loss of lives. Most regrettable is the fact that the government instead of being decisive in providing lasting solutions to the widespread economic quagmire resorted in using religion as a tool to pacify the poor masses to accept the untold hardships accruing from it as necessary evil to achieving their long expected comfort. This clearly manifested in the government's use of such religious terms as hope, patience, faith and sacrifice in its respective national addresses to the citizens. This strategy of government in addressing the economic hardships and pains of the people strongly validates Karl Max's conception of religion as *opium of the masses*. The citizens on their part have not fared differently, but instead resorted to religion as well in order to provide a temporary sigh of relief or escape from the hardships and injustices in Nigeria. Thus it is safe to conclude that both the government and citizens' actions and inactions strongly validate Marx's conception of religion in the current petroleum subsidy removal regime. It also demonstrates how economic conditions could influence religious beliefs and practices as Marx correctly observed.



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