

**‘OPIUM OF THE MASSES’: INTERROGATING MARX’S ANALYSIS OF RELIGION’S
DOCILITY THROUGH THE NIGERIA’S POLITICAL ECONOMY**

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Abstract

In a poverty-stricken society marked by entrenched inequality, corruption, and fragile democratic institutions all of which make up the significant factors in the crises of national development, many Nigerians have resorted to religion for some sort of comfort and hope even of feature they are yet to see. By employing Marxist theoretical analysis, this paper tries to investigate whether religion in Nigeria functions predominantly as “opium of the people,” pacifying and mystifying class relations or represents an instrument of liberation, empowering grass roots resistance while providing welfare for its people. The paper finds out that while a religion represents a diffuse associational infrastructure capable of maintaining moral standard, material redistribution and solidarity that can galvanize into political actions, in Nigeria politics and economic trajectory region has become more of an ideological apparatus mediating class domination and sustaining status quo under a petro-rentier capitalist state. The paper the concludes that Marx’s description of religion as “the opium of the masses” finds considerable resonance in Nigeria’s political economy because the nation’s religious structures through political pacification, economic escapism, and elite manipulation have successfully fragmented the oppressed class, dull their emancipatory political consciousness and by implication impede the much-needed systemic reform.

Keywords: Poverty, Materialism, Mobilization, Policy, Social consciousness, Ideology superstructure, Hypnotism

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Introduction

Nigeria today in the face of its vast natural resources and gigantic status as Africa's largest economy has continued to grapple with deepened and widespread poverty mingled with unplaced frustration that particularly identifies the worst cost of living crisis in about 30 years or more (Human Right Watch, 2024; Galal 2024; Ishola 2025). A quick explanation to this poverty prevalence is deeply deeply linked with the state's political-economic structure which is characterized by rent-seeking, very corrupt and weak governance institutions (Joseph, 1987; Fagbemi et al., 2020; Ogbuabor et al., 2025). In this case. the country's political economy is largely driven by oil revenues, creating a rentier state where political elites capture state resources for personal gain, leaving almost nothing for broad-based economic development (Watts2004; Sala-i-Martin & Subramanian, 2013).With significant disparities in income distribution and access to basic services, there is a glaring concentration of wealth and power in the hands of the few alongside limited opportunities and growing unemployment among others, which all account for the social exclusion in the nation and the resulting exacerbated poverty and general poor development.

The real lamentation in this trajectory is that as many Nigerians experience this economic hardship, there are no established government institutions that provide some sort of succour through social protection or such that

responsible for any meaningful commitment to improve the citizens' livelihoods (Omeje, 2019; Ishola, 2025). Hence by this state failures, religion aptly becomes a comforting refuge for millions of neglected Nigerians bashed and battered by unfavourable political and economic policies of the insensitive government. Accordingly, religious institutions not only offer some form of spiritual solace to the people but much more importantly social support and a belonging community for the masses who have longed been abandoned by the state through the irresponsible administrative recklessness of government. Religion then offers that glimmering hope amid Nigeria political economic quagmire. This is clearly evidenced in the rise of Pentecostalism and other religious movements in Nigeria to reflect this trend, as people turn to faith for meaning, empowerment, and apparent solutions in a context where formal political and economic systems have failed to meet of up (Gifford, 2004; Ojo, 2018) even with the basic expectations. Religion, thus, serves as both a coping mechanism and an alternative space where Nigerians seek dignity and purpose amid their wrecking poverty and political disenchantment.

Indeed, the influence of religion on Nigeria's political economy is not entirely new and has not always been positive as it appears. Especially tracing from the colonial period when British indirect rule strategically leveraged on religious structures for administrative and economic control in the North. In this case, Islamic institutions were

incorporated into the governance apparatus through the preservation of emirate systems, while in the South, Christian missionary education facilitated the creation of a Western-educated elite class that would later dominate the postcolonial political landscape (Crowder, 1978; Usman, 1987). This bifurcated colonial policy evidently has significant bearing on Nigeria political economy by creating uneven access to state resources and divergent development course between these regions that persists even until today.

Hence, the interrogation of the true role religion in the political economy of Nigeria becomes a compelling necessity. If not for anything, at least for its parts shaping the national historical development, institutional character and structural configurations of Nigeria, all of which condition the socio-economic realities of this country Building therefore on Marx analysis of 'religion' superstructure, this paper intends to probe how religion has conditioned the political economic realities of the nation especially in the present republic.

The Marx analysis of Religion Superstructure: A theoretical Framework

Karl Marx popular statement that 'religion is the opium of the people' has come to define the role religion especially as it can be observed within an underdeveloped society. As a product of Political and economic suffering, religion simultaneously conceals conceal this suffering by offering illusory

consolation, functioning as a kind of sigh for the oppressed rather than a true solution to their plight (Marx, 1844;1970). Karl Marx generally engaged the history of the world political economy through the method of Dialectic Materialism. It is the core philosophical foundations of Karl Marx's thought and his actual contribution to the evolution of the world economic development. It is both an approach of philosophical enquiry and a theory of history that explains socio-economic development through the interplay of material conditions and class contradictions. Although, Marx inherited the dialectical method from G. W. F. Hegel but he fundamentally transformed it to capture a political analysis of human interactions. While, Hegel employed dialectics in an idealist framework, emphasizing the primacy of ideas, Marx on the other hand introduced dialectics in material life and production. For Marx therefore, history is not a linear progression guided by abstract ideas but a dynamic process shaped by contradictions in the material conditions of existence (Marx & Engels, 1970; Bottomore 2002).

At the heart of this dialectical materialism consists of two interconnected thoughts which are dialectics and materialism. At first, 'Dialectics' which refers to the logic of change, where contradictions are inherent in social and natural processes, producing transformation through the struggle of opposites (Lenin, 1977) and the second which is 'Materialism', on the other hand, asserts that the material conditions of

production such as economic structures, technology, and labor relations constitute the foundation of social life, from which politics, law, ideology as well as religion emerge (Marx, 1970). According to Karl Marx, there are two basic parts of every society which are the 'foundation' or the base and the 'superstructure'. For any society, the economic structure which is material in nature is the foundation and upon which upon which rest the Superstructure which are nonmaterial institutions or more of socially accepted values such as in law, education, culture and religion to mention just a few.

As Marx explained "the mode of production of material life conditions the social, political and intellectual life process in general. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness" (Marx, 1970:21). In this formulation, the forces of production which are resources, (tools, technology, labor) and the relations of production, that is affiliations (property relations, class divisions) form the 'base'. On this foundation arises the superstructure, consisting of political institutions (the state, law), cultural and ideological institutions (religion, philosophy, morality), and the broader forms of social consciousness. The function of the superstructure is to stabilize and reproduce the base, ensuring the continued dominance of the ruling class. In other words, while means of production and the relations of production informed the super structure, the superstructure as well the becomes a virile tool for providing

maintenance of the relation of production as well as means of production.

In overview, following from Marx argument, there are at least two visible roles of super structure in a political economy, especially as it concerns religion. The first is the fact the superstructure functions to reproduce existing social relations. For Marx (1970), the wage contract, the enforcement of property rights, and the sanctity of markets are not neutral legal constructs but specific superstructural mechanisms enabling capitalist accumulation. Accordingly, the education system, the media, and religion operate as ideological apparatuses that normalize capitalist relations and obscure class exploitation. Louis Althusser also in addition recast this insight through the lens of ideological state apparatuses (1971; 2014). According to him, the state comprises not only repressive state apparatuses such as army, police, judiciary and so on but also ideological state apparatuses which include schools, media and worship centers such as churches. These institutions do not simply reflect the base but actively shape subjectivity and reproduce the conditions for capitalist production.

Another crucial role of the superstructure lies in ideological legitimation. Marx (1844;1970) emphasized that ruling ideas present themselves as universal truths. In other words, Karl Marx believed that the ideas promoted by the powerful people in society are usually presented as if they are natural, correct, and beneficial for everyone while in actual fact these ideas mainly serve the

interests of the ruling class. Similarly, another thinker, Gramsci (1971) later developed this into the concept of hegemony where he equally argues that ruling classes maintain power not merely by coercion but by securing the consent of subordinate classes. In this case, Civil society and religious societies such as churches including schools and unions become the arena where ideologies are contested and consented to which now become the basis for engaging the economic and socio-political life. Hence, religious intellectuals often become key sites either for hegemonic consolidation or counter-hegemonic insurgency (Gramsci, 1971) depending on their alignment with broader class interests. For instance, in capitalist societies, this would mean that ideologies of freedom, equality, and meritocracy make wage labor appear natural and fair, despite its exploitative foundation. The superstructure thus stabilizes capitalism by ensuring that exploitation appears as voluntary exchange.

Recalibrating the Marxist analysis on Nigeria Political Economy

It is credible to claim that the political economy of Nigeria cannot be meaningfully understood without taking due cognizance of the role religion plays in shaping its historical development, institutional configurations, and socio-economic experiences. In the post-independence Nigeria, religion has transcended the usual personal and spiritual domains by which it is usually known to function more as a key axis of political and economic mobilization, thereby becoming a

vital instrument of state-society relations. To begin is the fact that Nigeria as a nation is deeply religious, with over 95% of the population identifying as either Christian or Muslim (Pew Research Center, 2020). These religious affiliations are also sometimes intertwined with ethnic identities which are not merely a symbol but vividly play out in regional political alignments within the nation. In this case, Religion actively mediate power relations, influence policy decisions, and frame discourses around governance, development, and national unity (Falola, 2022; Obadare, 2018; Marshall, 2009). The Nigeria returns to civilian rule in 1999 could be considered to have marked a significant moment in the reassertion of the role religion play in the national public sphere, with northern states implementing expanded versions of sharia law and southern states witnessing the rapid rise of Pentecostal political activism (Kendhammer, 2016; Obadare, 2018) even in the face of increasing economic hardship. In other words, there appeared to be more concerns for religious sentiments rather than value of economic necessities itself.

Indeed, Nigerian's hope of better life after long years of military rule is apparently bashed by various waves of socio-economic crisis that has befalling the nation and has continued to grow worse by successive democratic government since 1999, identifying the continuous chain of bad leadership and irresponsive governance that have kept on steering the national wheel into the dungeon of hopelessness. Even though

Democracy by its nature of civic participation being that ‘government of the people, by the people’ naturally maintains self-corrective mechanism inherent within it, to rid itself of bad leadership and irresponsible governance, at least to a very significant level. Foremost among these measures are those that attempt to establish the sovereign rule of the people such regular election and civil protest among others, which are naturally not just the rights of citizens but importantly their civic obligation police and monitor political leaders to submit to people’s consent. However, this political power has been strategically cornered by political elites who through primordial sentiments such as religion has rendered the citizens impotent in their own cause. In this case religious identity in Nigeria is often instrumentalized by political actors to consolidate influence, sideline constructive debate, and redirect public focus away from governance deficits. Victoria Jatau and Kangdim Dingji Maza (2023) note that religious and political elites frequently weaponize religion to undermine democratic institutions and fostering instability, thus degrading civic discourse and obstructing the consolidation of a robust democratic culture.

Hence, Religion in Nigeria has remained a critical instrument for political control. Since independence, politicians have invoked religious rhetoric to appeal to sectarian identity rather than policy-based governance (Udoidem, 1997). Political mobilization through religious identity is particularly evident during elections, where candidates frequently position themselves as defenders

of a particular faith to secure votes. For instance, the 2015 Nigerian presidential elections saw intense debates over the religious backgrounds of the major candidates, Muhammadu Buhari (a Muslim from the North) and Goodluck Jonathan (a Christian from the South), often overshadowing discussions of economic policy or anti-corruption strategy (BBC News, 2015).

More recently, the 2023 presidential election vividly illustrates this dynamic. The All-Progressives Congress's (APC) choice of a Muslim-Muslim ticket provoked widespread religious backlash from Christian groups, civil society, and religious bodies like the Christian Association of Nigeria, who argued that such a ticket undermined national unity and risked marginalizing Christian citizens. On the other hand the decisions of the presidential candidate was born out of unguided ambition to secure huge vote from the Northern part of the country which largely Muslim populated, thereby deciding to pick a Muslim running mate instead of a Christian while the presidential candidate himself is already a muslim. Thus, Religious mobilization during the contest reflected deep-seated integration of faith in politics and thereby overshadowing the real issue of policy discourse and state development that was supposed to dominate the civil political campaign.

Beyond endorsements, religious rhetoric often reframes governance failure as divine testing or an opportunity for spiritual growth, voiding

expectations of accountability. The politicization of religion has also produced contestations over constitutional secularism that is initially enshrined in Section 10 of the 1999 Constitution, which prohibits the adoption of a state religion. Whereas there appears to be a blurred boundaries between state and religion as it can be seen in the state funding of pilgrimages, official religious councils and different faith-based policy initiatives. This has given political elites the needed opportunity to continue to harness religion as both a legitimating ideology and a tool of governance (Okene, 2010; Ostien, 2007).

Similarly, Paden and Obadare (2024) analyzed that religious groups frequently secure policy concessions such as Hajj subsidies and pilgrimage support which further binds popular religion to state responsiveness and divert people attention from real structural challenge while diffusing impulses toward systemic reform. In fact, in some extreme cases, religious gatherings are even repurposed as political campaign platforms through sermons that are obviously infused with partisan messaging. This event among many others is found to further blurs boundaries between devotion and political persuasion, diminishing moral integrity of religious institutions and reducing its dignity to mere political tools for shielding political actors from accountability and responsive governance.

Indeed, religious mobilization Nigeria political economy is not accidental but rooted

in the political elite's awareness of religion's binding power, particularly in the absence of strong civic institutions, appeals to religious solidarity therefore becomes very handy in supplanting accountability and policy debate, thereby reinforcing a status quo that benefits the ruling class (Ibrahim & Kazah-Toure, 2003). Thus, Nigerian Political elites continued to exploit 'religion drugged' citizens through this sentiment, especially within impoverished and illiterate communities and with Such manipulation perpetuates mass disenfranchisement and systemic complacency (Omatsaye, 2018) From the angle of underdeveloped opened market system where overwhelming majority of the population lack the financial capacity to meet up with the basic life requirement, religion's economic significance becomes more visible in its role as a provider of welfare and public goods. The National Bureau of Statistics (2023), itself would admit that over 133 million Nigerians live in multidimensional poverty, lacking adequate access to education, healthcare, and housing. Given this Nigerian state's chronic governance deficits and lack of tangible state welfare measures, religious organizations automatically stepped into these critical gaps in health care, education, poverty alleviation, and other social protection activities (Aghedo & Eke, 2013) winning them the important credibility lost by the government. For instance, Islamic charitable obligations such as zakat and Christian tithing systems channel substantial resources into informal redistribution networks (Loimeier, 2013; Kalu, 2008). While these systems

undoubtedly alleviate immediate suffering, it at best would merely represent a palliative means of relieving the symptoms of inequality without actually addressing its structural causes, thereby reinforcing the legitimacy of an inequitable order.

In the same vein, the persistent poverty and socio-economic exclusion in Nigeria easily propelled a widespread reliance on miracle-oriented religious narratives. For instance, Ademiluka (2023) elucidates how Pentecostal preachers craft doctrines that mirror economic despair, presenting divine intervention through miracles as a more immediate solution than institutional reform. Many followers attend services “to seek a solution to their socio-economic problems,” and churches often displace formal healthcare becoming "doctor and pharmacy" to the poor. This assertion was reiterated by Augustine Omavuebe (2024) who highlights the ideological tendencies of the prosperity gospel to promise worldly success via divine means, thereby effectively deflecting attention from governance accountability, structural inequality, or long-term development strategies (Omavuebe, 2024). Accordingly, religious ethics, prosperity teachings, and prophetic endorsements has been found to usually reframe economic suffering as spiritual warfare and personal breakthrough, often fixing perfectly with elite project.

Meanwhile, Multiple surveys confirm that Nigerians consistently express higher trust in religious leaders than in governmental

institutions (Afrobarometer, 2022). This consequently created a potent tool that politicians need to perpetually keep down the economically oppressed citizens from standing up to emancipate themselves while many religious leaders find proximity to power useful for protection and access. Hence, the political economy of religion in Nigeria is vividly underscored by the collusion of religious elites with political power whereby some pastors and imams align with government figures in exchange for privilege such as land allocations, political appointments, financial backing therefore destroying the what supposed to be the dignified role of religion as a social critics and making them incapable of challenging the politicians but instead reinforcing the elites they ought to challenge (Smith, 2021; Obadare, 2018)

Another very significant backlash of religious hypnotism stemming out of state failure to deliver public goods manifested in Nigeria security crisis where religious insurgent groups such as Boko Haram draw the nation into tales of chaotic trajectory. This populated youth group, congealed in a zone of chronic state abandonment, unemployment tied with excruciating poverty and collapsed rural economies creating credence for radical preaching of fanatical religious leaders and making this militarized option of a good idea. In this case religion appears like a liberation tool to express rage and loss, organized into an anti-state project, it in real sense preys on the same poor people it claims to redeem.

Conclusion

There is less than a little doubt that Karl Marx's claim of religion as "the opium of the masses" finds considerable resonance in Nigeria's political economy. In a society marked by entrenched inequality, mass poverty and corruption fueled by bad leadership and irresponsible governance, religion automatically functions as the manipulative comforting tool for sustaining the status quo. Religious structures have been found to numb appropriate Socio-Economic and political consciousness that could have facilitated systemic reform.

The poor social condition of the people evidence in endemic poverty that has continued to grow worse with overbearing economic policies, poor formal education and political education and mass disorientation have all served as fertile ground for harvesting seemingly hopeless citizens into the web of religion who now total submission accept this social structure as the only escape route from economic oppression. Nonetheless, recognizing this pattern may not entirely entail a blanket condemnation of religion. As noted earlier, religions institutions have taken leading role in the provision of developmental structures such as education, health services and institutions as well as other element of social protection while potentially attempting to give back some level value or dignity (which has been practically taken away by dysfunctional government) to average Nigerians.

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