

Islamic Jihad: An Antithesis of Marx's "Opium of the Masses" Theory

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Received: 01-01-2025

Revised: 28-01-2025

Accepted: 10-02-2025

Published: 01-03-2025

ABSTRACT

Karl Marx's claim that religion serves as the opium of the people suggests that it is often used as a tool to silence the oppressed and make them bear their agonies and sufferings in the name of religion. This study critically examines Marx's assertion, arguing that rather than being an opiate of the masses, Islam challenges social injustice and works as a catalyst for positive social change. Using a qualitative research approach, this study analyzes historical evidence from the Quran, Hadith, and the Prophet's biography to demonstrate how Islam effectively confronted injustice, empowered marginalized communities, and challenged oppressive structures. Through an analytical comparison between Marxist conflict theory and Islamic justice theory, this paper highlights Islam's role in promoting societal transformation rather than being passive. The findings suggest that Islam's emphasis on justice, equality, and resistance to tyranny contradicts the notion that it merely appeases believers and instead portrays it as a force for meaningful reform.

Keywords: Religion, Conflict theory, Islam, Oppression, Marginalization

INTRODUCTION

Sociologists view religion from diverse perspectives, each offering different insights into the role of religion in human society. The functionalists regard religion as a source of societal stability and social cohesion. Unlike the functionalist perspective, symbolic interactionism takes interest in how meanings are assigned to religious rituals and practices in a society. It focuses on how individuals interpret their religious experiences. The conflict perspective, deeply impacted by the ideas of Karl Marx, considers religion a tool of exploitation that reinforces social inequality. The widely held belief that "religion is the opium of the masses" was documented by Karl Marx in his 1844 work *A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*. His well-known remark has been understood by academics of all eras as a Marxist

criticism of the detrimental influence of religion on society. Marx argues that religion persuades the masses to abstain from rising against the oppressive class. They are content with the status quo as a result of this religious brainwashing. He concurs that because religion meets people's emotional needs, it might provide them with psychological comfort. He contends, however, that religious ideas serve as a spiritual tranquilizer that keeps the oppressed from rising up in rebellion. Marx says:

"Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people." ¹

METHODOLGY

This study argues that Islam functions more as a catalyst than an opiate, driving positive change by addressing social injustice, patriarchal mindsets, and oppression. We employed a qualitative research approach to analyze Karl Marx's "opium of the masses" theory. Utilizing a historical and analytical method, we primarily draw on the Holy Quran, Hadith, and Seerah to demonstrate how Islam has contributed to improving the conditions of marginalized communities.

A Critique of Marx's Theory

Karl Marx's thesis of "opium of the masses" has been subjected to scholarly critique by several intellectuals. Michael Löwy (2005), for instance, conducted research on the role of religion in the Latin American political context. He maintains that religion is a double-edged sword, which has been used as a tool of oppression as well as a catalyst for revolutionary advocacy of the rights of the oppressed and the deprived. Michael Löwy studied Liberation Theology and concluded that religion played a vital role in arousing resistance against the oppressive capitalist order. Thus, he proves that religion is not a purely negative force; it has great power to transform society in favor of the downtrodden class.²

Roland Boer (2012) examines the relevance of Marxist critique in the contemporary ideological landscape. According to him, Marx regarded religion as a strong tool of social control, but his successors, Marxists like Antonio Gramsci and Ernst Bloch, for example, admitted that religion is a complex phenomenon and is not always oppressive, as Marx thought, but also progressive. Boer criticizes the reductionist approach to religion as merely an opiate and asserts that it is a strong force for positive social mobilization.³

Terry Eagleton (2009) views neither militant atheism nor conservative religiosity in a favorable light. He argues that religion is neither oppressive in its nature nor inherently liberatory. However, he admits the unfortunate reality that religious folks have used religion to justify inhuman acts and the exploitation of poor people. He gives partial approval to Marx's theory that religion pacifies the poor; however, he believes that religion is a radical force that has been used for social justice movements.⁴

The very essence of Islamic Jihad strongly challenges the "opium of the masses" thesis. Contrary to Marx's theory of the opiate, Islamic Jihad is a strong mobilizing force for the marginalized and persecuted masses. Marx argues that religion functions as a tool to pacify the deprived have-nots, but history tells us that Islamic Jihad ideology has invariably aroused people against social and economic injustice. Jihad is not just a military struggle; it is rather an all-encompassing endeavor to establish a just political, social, and economic order. The Quran explicitly underscores defense and advocacy of the oppressed as the primary objective of Jihad:

"And what is [the matter] with you that you do not fight in the cause of Allah and [for] the oppressed among men, women, and children who say, 'Our Lord,

take us out of this city of oppressive people and appoint for us from Yourself a protector and appoint for us from Yourself a helper?"⁵

The classical intellectuals and jurists in the history of Islam interpreted the concept of Jihad as a means of defending the weak and ensuring social and economic justice for the marginalized and the deprived ones. For instance, Imam Abu Hanifa (d. 767 CE) considered it mandatory when an unjust ruler persecuted the people. Similarly, Ibn Taymiyyah (d. 1328 CE) asserted that armed resistance is recommendable when oppressive rulers persecute the poor. According to Ibn Khaldun, through Jihad, corrupt elites may be dethroned.⁶

In modern times, jihad has been used as an ideological call for Muslim societies to be freed. The opiate theory was totally disproved by the Mahdist Rebellion (1881–1898), which was a Jihad against British colonialism. The Algerian War of Independence serves as yet another illustration of how Jihad is a fight against unfair occupation. Hodgson concurs with this opinion:

"Islamic Jihad has historically been the language of anti-colonial resistance, proving that Islam does not pacify but rather awakens the oppressed."⁷

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The Islamic concept of jihad

The term *jihad* is normally associated with armed struggle, but it has a wide range of meanings. It is basically derived from the trilateral root J-H-D, which signifies struggle and exertion. The word *jihad* and its derivatives appear in various Qur'anic contexts. It has different meanings depending on the context. For instance, it means struggle for a noble divine cause through patience, tenacity, and selfless sacrifice, while the word is employed in some contexts to mean physical combat for self-defense and protection of the marginalized, innocent Muslim community.⁹

Over time, Muslim jurists have tried to delineate the boundaries of *jihad*. In the eighth century, jurists divided the world into two realms, namely *Dar al-Harb* and *Dar al-Islam*. This categorization had a significant impact on the idea of *jihad*.¹⁰ It influenced the ethical-legal views pertaining to external *jihad* and the resultant extension of the boundaries of the Islamic state. Notably, Sufyan al-Thawri supported the defensive interpretation of the term *jihad*, emphasizing tolerance toward diversity of thought and peaceful coexistence with other communities.

Muslim scholars divided the concept of *jihad* into two categories, namely lesser *jihad* and greater *jihad*. The latter is about inner struggle against one's lower desires and the endeavor to improve one's moral and spiritual being. This idea of *jihad* signifies the importance of discipline, spiritual development, and moral elevation in the Islamic tradition.

In contemporary times, the term *jihad* has been narrowly defined by some militants on the one hand and misconstrued by Islamophobes on the other. Both the Muslim proponents of *jihad* and its non-Muslim opponents have unfortunately associated the concept of *jihad* with violent militancy. A linguistic examination of its trilateral root reveals that the term has multifaceted semantic shades, encompassing personal moral, spiritual, and sometimes defensive and revolutionary struggle.

The concept of *jihad* during the lifetime of the Prophet, peace be upon him, was not narrowly interpreted as a physical struggle against enemies. Rather, it was a concerted effort toward social justice. In the subsequent rule of the four pious caliphs, it encompassed advocating for the rights of the downtrodden and marginalized folks. The way they understood the idea of *jihad* is antithetical to what Marx described as the

"opiate of the masses." Both the Prophet, peace be upon him, and his Rightly Guided Caliphs used the idea of *jihad* to help the oppressed and improve their material condition.

The Prophet (peace be upon him) struggled vigorously, focusing on the rights of the poor and the underprivileged. A cursory study his life reveals his genuine concern for social justice and the well-being of deprived communities. Abu Huraira (may Allah be pleased with him) narrated that Muhammad (peace be upon him) said:

"The one who strives to help the widows and the poor is like the one who fights in the way of Allah, or like the one who prays at night continuously and fasts during the day."¹¹ He always identified himself as a poor man, and to encourage poor people, he used to say: "O Allah, grant me life as a poor person, cause me to die as a poor person, and resurrect me among the poor."¹²

Marx maintains that the poor remain poor because of the opiate of religion, but contrary to what he theorized, the Prophet (peace be upon him) did not regard poverty as an ideal condition, as is evident from his saying: *"O Allah, I seek refuge in You from disbelief and poverty."¹³*

His mission guaranteed support for the poor, as he is reported to have said: *"He is not a believer whose stomach is filled while his neighbor goes hungry."* Likewise, he made it the duty of the Muslim ruler to feed the hungry and free the captives:

Another hadith narrated by Abu Huraira defines the best charity as:

"That which is given when you are healthy and greedy, hoping to be wealthy but fearing poverty. And do not delay it until death approaches you."¹⁴

Moreover, he strongly warned his followers against oppressing the weak. Abu Dharr narrated that the Prophet (peace be upon him) said:

"Allah has said: O My servants, I have forbidden oppression for Myself and have made it forbidden among you, so do not oppress one another."¹⁵

These and many other hadiths demonstrate that the mission of the Prophet (peace be upon him), far from being the opiate, was quite evidently a mission of uplifting the miserable condition of the poor and the underprivileged. It aimed at economic fairness, charity, and social justice.

The history of the Prophetic battles also shows that his battles were fought for social justice, not for power or material gain. His battles demonstrate that his religious message was not the *opiate of the masses* that pacified the oppressed or taught them to passively bear tyranny and oppression. The Prophet (peace be upon him) sacrificed his comfort and blood to liberate the oppressed from tyranny and injustice. It is an undeniable fact that his battles aimed at protecting the marginalized, the persecuted, such as the poor and slaves.

His battles directly contradict Marx's *opiate of the masses* theory, as he waged war not to empower tyrannical regimes but rather to challenge the unjust political and social order. Unlike mundane wars fought for economic benefits and territorial expansion, his battles were driven by the noble ideal of protecting the oppressed and persecuted. His message was not aimed at inculcating passive submission; rather, he taught his followers to rise and resist tyranny and exploitation.

The Battle of Badr (624) was evidently not an offensive military engagement but a response to the polytheists' persecution of the nascent Muslim community in Mecca. History bears testimony to the harsh reality that they were brutally tormented, their hard-earned money and property were usurped, and they were ultimately forced into exile. The Holy Quran explicitly depicts their *jihad* as a struggle to eradicate religious persecution and ensure social justice:

*"Permission [to fight] has been given to those who are being fought because they were wronged. And indeed, Allah is competent to give them victory. [They are] those who have been evicted from their homes without right—only because they say, 'Our Lord is Allah.'"*¹⁶

Rather than being an *opiate of the masses*, Islamic jihad religiously mobilized the marginalized to rise in arms against injustice. The victory in the first battle boosted the morale of the previously helpless, penniless, and powerless Muslims, demonstrating that Islam was not a tool of submission but a powerful challenge to exploitative powers.

At Uhud, the Muslim army suffered considerable losses, showing that their jihad was not meant to conquer lands or obtain material gain. In spite of the heavy losses, the Prophet (peace be upon him) strictly adhered to war ethics and refused to enslave innocent people or plunder unjustly. His leadership cultivated the sublime notion that jihad is a pious religious struggle for justice, not an endeavor for economic exploitation.

Similarly, the conquest of Mecca may be interpreted as a mission of liberation. The Prophet (peace be upon him) and his companions were severely persecuted in Mecca and were ultimately forced into exile. However, when they returned with great military might, the Prophet (peace be upon him) entered with an unfathomable spirit of forgiveness. He could have sought revenge, but he avoided bloodshed and declared a general amnesty for those who had been unjust to him and his followers. He proclaimed:

*"Go, for you are free."*¹⁷

He did not use religion as a tool to oppress people; rather, he used the force of religion to eradicate the tyrannical aristocracy of Quraysh and effectively dismantle exploitation, which was rampant in the ugly forms of usury and slave abuse.

The entire life of the Prophet (peace be upon him) was a revolutionary struggle against social injustice. He never used religion to persuade the oppressed to accept suffering; rather, he empowered them to combat unjust oppression and persecution. His treatment of the marginalized bears this out. For instance, he granted slaves rights, emphasized their liberation, and gave them social mobility as human beings worthy of reverence.

His jihad was the advocacy for the rights of oppressed women in a patriarchal society. Pre-Islamic Arab society considered women a burden and consequently practiced female infanticide. The Prophet (peace be upon him) strongly condemned this evil practice, and the Holy Qur'an outlawed it:

*"When the girl [who was] buried alive is asked for what sin she was killed."*¹⁸

Similarly, women had no right to inheritance in pre-Islamic Arab society. In that misogynistic and hostile environment, he implemented their rightful share with the following divine command:

*"For men is a share of what the parents and close relatives leave, and for women is a share of what the parents and close relatives leave, be it little or much—an obligatory share."*¹⁹

Moreover, he emphasized their education. He said:

*"Seeking knowledge is an obligation upon every Muslim."*²⁰

His charity began at home, as his wife Aisha (may Allah be pleased with her) became a profound scholar of Islamic thought, particularly in hadith studies.

In addition, women in that patriarchal society were often forced into marriage. The Prophet (peace be upon him) prohibited this practice and forbade society from forcing women into marriage without their consent. Once, a woman complained that her father had forced her into marriage, and the Prophet (peace be upon him) ruled:

"A woman who is forced into marriage without her consent, her marriage is invalid."²¹

He also elevated the spiritual and religious status of women and declared them to be on equal footing with men. The Holy Qur'an affirms this equality:

"Indeed, the Muslim men and Muslim women, the believing men and believing women... Allah has prepared for them forgiveness and a great reward."²²

Instead of being an opiate, Muhammad made zakat a required tenet of Islam in order to utilize religion to combat economic disparity. By outlawing usury (riba), the Holy Qur'an also ensures that money is not concentrated in the hands of a select few but is instead dispersed to the poor:

"Take from their wealth a charity by which you purify them and cause them to increase."²³

The Prophet (peace be upon him) highlighted the significance of this financial system, saying: "Indeed, Allah has made it obligatory upon them (the wealthy) to give charity from their wealth, which is to be taken from their rich and distributed among their poor."²⁴

Likewise, he helped the poor by prohibiting usury (riba). In pre-Islamic Arab society, usury was a major menace and a significant cause of economic oppression. Affluent moneylenders exploited the poor by lending money at exorbitant interest rates. The Prophet (peace be upon him) waged jihad against this economic injustice and proclaimed: "All forms of usury are abolished, and the first usury I abolish is that of my own uncle, Abbas ibn Abdul-Muttalib."²⁵ Moreover, he ensured fair wages for laborers and, beyond mandatory Zakat, encouraged Sadaqah (voluntary charity) and generosity to reduce economic disparity

CONCLUSION

In light of the above discussion, one may safely argue that Karl Marx's assertion that religion serves as the opiate of the masses does not apply to Islam, particularly its noble ideal of jihad. Unlike his claim that religion is a tool to pacify the persecuted and oppressed, Islamic jihad serves as a powerful force to transform society socially, morally, and politically to safeguard the rights of the oppressed minority. Islamic jihad is not confined to armed struggle; it encompasses moral purification and spiritual growth. The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) fought jihad against the oppression of minorities and their economic exploitation. His jihad aimed at securing the rights of the poor, laborers, and women. Through his struggle, he demonstrated that his idea of jihad was a catalyst for positive change rather than an opiate to make the oppressed passively give up in the face of oppression and tyranny.

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