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RECONSTRUCTING MARX ON CLASS, CONFLICT, AND RELIGION: AN ISLAMIC CRITICAL RESPONSE

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Abstract: *This article examines Karl Marx's theory of social class, conflict, and his characterization of religion as "the opium of the people," testing the explanatory reach of that theory against the Islamic intellectual tradition's account of religion's social function. Marx held that capitalist society divides into two structurally antagonistic classes the bourgeoisie, who own the means of production, and the proletariat, who own only their labor and that religion, as a product of this material base, anesthetizes the suffering this antagonism produces while legitimating the rule of the dominant class. Using a qualitative literature-analysis design, the study reads Marx's primary texts alongside contemporary Marxist class theory and the sociology of religion, then places this body of work in critical dialogue with Islamic scholars Ibn Khaldun, Sayyid Qutb, Ali Shariati, Ismail al-Faruqi, Fazlur Rahman, and Azyumardi Azra who contest Marx's reduction of religion to ideological narcosis. The analysis finds that Marx's class framework retains strong explanatory power for reading contemporary economic inequality, including in Indonesia, but that his religious critique, generalized from the European church's historical alliance with ruling power, does not transfer cleanly to traditions in which religion has functioned as a vocabulary of resistance. The article's contribution is twofold: theoretically, it integrates alienation-centered Marxist class theory with Islamic liberationist thought; practically, it offers social movements a framework that takes both economic structure and religious conviction seriously as sources of social transformation.*

Keywords: *Karl Marx; social class; conflict theory; opium of the people; Islamic liberation theology; religion and ideology; social justice*.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the years since the 2008 financial crisis, a body of work once consigned to undergraduate survey courses has returned, almost without announcement, to the center of serious social theory. Class analysis, declared functionally dead by the sociology of the 1990s, has been revived by economists and sociologists alike as the most plausible explanation for a pattern that resists every other account: wealth concentrating at the top of nearly every advanced economy at a pace that outstrips wage growth, productivity gains, and the redistributive capacity of the welfare state (Øversveen & Kelly, 2023). Marx did not predict the specific shape this concentration would take - he could not have anticipated platform capitalism, algorithmic management, or sovereign wealth funds - but the analytical apparatus he built to explain nineteenth-century industrial capitalism turns out to generalize further than many of his twentieth-century critics expected.

Indonesia offers a concrete illustration of this generalization. Mahasiswa turun ke jalan - students taking to the streets - to oppose policies seen as favoring capital owners, alongside organized labor actions against the erosion of the minimum wage and the privatization of natural resources, are not isolated outbursts of discontent but recurring features of a social structure in which the distance between owners and workers continues to widen (Rasya & Triadi, 2024). Indonesia's official Gini ratio, the standard measure of income inequality, stood at 0.388 in March 2023 - the highest level recorded in the five years since 2018 - before easing only slightly to 0.379 in March 2024 and rising again to 0.381 by September 2024 (BPS, 2023). Statistics Indonesia's own analysis of the 2023 figure attributed the increase to the consumption of the wealthiest twenty percent of the population rising substantially faster than that of the bottom eighty percent, with the richest fifth of Indonesians accounting for nearly half of all household expenditure nationally. This is, in miniature, exactly

the dynamic Marx described: a structural transfer of the social surplus toward those who already control capital, occurring not despite the formal mechanisms of a market economy but through them.

It is against this backdrop that Marx's two best-known theoretical contributions - his theory of class conflict and his critique of religion as ideological narcotic - continue to generate both analytical purchase and considerable controversy. The first contribution holds up well under contemporary scrutiny, if anything gaining renewed attention as inequality researchers search for frameworks adequate to a moment the World Economic Forum itself has called the defining trend of the next decade (Øversveen & Kelly, 2023). The second contribution - Marx's claim that religion functions as "the opium of the people," providing illusory comfort that disarms the oppressed and thereby perpetuates their oppression - has proven far more contested, and nowhere more so than among scholars writing from within religious traditions whose historical relationship to power differs sharply from the nineteenth-century European Christianity Marx had directly in view.

This tension is not new, but it has acquired fresh urgency. Public debate after public debate - over minimum-wage demonstrations, over resource nationalization, over legislative proposals widely perceived to favor commercial interests over ordinary citizens - replays, in local idiom, the structural antagonism Marx identified between the class that owns productive capital and the class that does not (Marx, 2014; Cohen, 1998). Marx's division of capitalist society into bourgeoisie and proletariat, developed to explain the factory economy of Victorian England, continues to organize how observers make sense of social conflict in a twenty-first-century, majority-Muslim, Southeast Asian democracy - a transfer across time and geography that itself raises the question this article pursues (Marx & Engels, 2021).

That question sharpens considerably once religion enters the analysis. Marx's argument, developed most fully in his 1843 introduction to A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy

of Right, holds that religious sentiment is "the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world" - a genuine human response to genuine suffering, but one that treats the symptom rather than the disease (Pedersen, 2015). For Marx, religion does not cause exploitation; it is produced by exploitation, and it perpetuates exploitation by displacing the desire for justice from this world to the next. "The abolition of religion as the illusory happiness of the people," Marx wrote, "is the demand for their real happiness" - meaning that genuine emancipation requires dispensing with the religious consolation that makes continued suffering bearable (Khan, 2019). Read carefully, this is a structural claim about religion's social function under specific historical conditions, not a metaphysical claim about whether God exists or a moral claim that individual believers are deluded (Khan, 2019). But the structural claim is itself contestable, and Indonesian and broader Muslim scholarship has contested it vigorously.

The contestation matters because it is not merely academic. Indonesia's modern history offers ready counter-examples to Marx's expectation that religion functions to pacify the oppressed: the Java War led by Pangeran Diponegoro, the Padri movement in the Minangkabau highlands, and the decades-long Acehnese resistance to Dutch colonial rule were all organized substantially through Islamic vocabulary, leadership structures, and eschatology, and all were directed against - rather than in service of - an occupying economic and political power (Saribunga & Hasaruddin, 2024). If religion in these cases functioned as opium, it was an unusually stimulating one. This pattern, of religion as a resource for resistance rather than resignation, recurs across the wider Muslim world and has generated its own substantial body of theory, from Sayyid Qutb's account of Islam as liberation from human-to-human domination to Ali Shariati's explicit framework of Islamic "liberation theology," developed in direct critical engagement with Marxism during the lead-up to the 1979 Iranian revolution (Nugroho & Surwandono, 2017).

The gap this article addresses, then, is not a gap in Marx scholarship narrowly construed - Marx's texts have been parsed exhaustively - but a gap in how that scholarship is brought into dialogue with the Islamic intellectual tradition specifically, and with the Indonesian context particularly. Two literatures have largely run on separate tracks: a Western sociological literature that increasingly treats Marx's economism as needing supplementation rather than replacement, reconstructing his theory of class around concepts like alienation rather than abandoning it (Øversveen & Kelly, 2023), and an Islamic scholarly literature that has, since at least the mid-twentieth century, developed sophisticated counter-arguments to Marx's account of religion without always engaging closely with the more defensible parts of his class analysis.

This article puts the two literatures in conversation, asking what remains true in Marx's account of class once Islamic critiques of his account of religion are taken seriously, and what is gained, theoretically, by refusing to treat "Marx on class" and "Marx on religion" as a package deal that must be accepted or rejected whole.

The article's central argument is that Marx's two claims do not in fact rise or fall together, and that separating them yields a more defensible and more useful theoretical position than either accepting or rejecting Marx wholesale. His structural analysis of class - the claim that ownership of productive resources generates a durable antagonism of interest between owners and workers, and that this antagonism is the primary engine of a great deal of observable social conflict - survives Islamic critique largely intact, because Islamic scholars writing on social justice (`adl), oppression (zulm), and the defense of the dispossessed (mustadh`afin) have generally affirmed rather than disputed the existence of structural economic injustice; their disagreement with Marx is almost never about whether exploitative class relations exist. His functionalist account of religion, by contrast, does not survive: it was built from a specific historical case - the institutional alliance between European Christian churches and feudal, then capitalist, ruling classes - and generalized illegitimately to religion as such, a move that empirical cases from the Islamic world (and, for that matter, from Christian liberation theology in Latin America) repeatedly falsify.

The theoretical framework guiding this analysis draws on three bodies of literature that are typically kept separate. The first is the sociological literature reconstructing Marxist class theory for contemporary conditions - represented here especially by recent work distinguishing economic exploitation from the deeper process of alienation, in which the products of labor are not merely unequally distributed but transformed into an autonomous power (capital) that comes to dominate the social order of which labor is the source (Øversveen & Kelly, 2023).

This reconstruction matters for the present analysis because it answers a standard objection to Marx - that class has been superseded by other axes of stratification, or that rising aggregate living standards under welfare capitalism falsified his predictions of immiseration - without requiring that Marx's framework be discarded. The second body of literature is the sociology of religion descending from Weber and, especially, from Peter Berger's account of religion as a socially constructed "sacred canopy" that legitimates an existing order by grounding it in a cosmic, rather than merely human, authority (Vandenberghe, 2018).

Berger's framework is useful here precisely because, despite Berger's own avowed distance from Marxism, his account of religious legitimation overlaps substantially with Marx's, while resting on a more developed theory of how legitimation actually operates - through plausibility structures, socialization, and the strategic concealment of religion's own constructed character (Hjelm, 2019). The third body of literature is the corpus of twentieth-century Islamic social and political thought that takes direct issue with Marx, from Ibn Khaldun's pre-modern theory of religiously grounded social solidarity (`asabiyyah) through Sayyid Qutb's, Ali Shariati's, Ismail al-Faruqi's, and Fazlur Rahman's contemporary formulations of Islam as a framework for social justice and liberation rather than quietism. Bringing these three literatures into a single frame - Marxist class reconstruction, Bergerian sociology of religious legitimation, and Islamic liberationist critique - is the specific theoretical contribution this article offers.

The choice of Indonesia as the empirical anchor for this discussion is not incidental. As the world's largest Muslim-majority democracy and a middle-income economy with a documented and persistent Gini coefficient near 0.38 (BPS, 2023), Indonesia presents an unusually clear test case for the question this article asks: does a society with substantial, measurable class-based inequality nevertheless show religion functioning as something other than ideological sedative? Indonesia's national motto and constitutional settlement explicitly fuse religious commitment (the first principle of Pancasila concerns belief in God) with a state ideology oriented toward social justice (the fifth principle), making the relationship between religious conviction and material justice a live constitutional question rather than a purely academic one. The country's history of religiously framed anticolonial resistance, discussed in the third section of the findings below, further supplies concrete historical cases against which Marx's generalization about religion's pacifying function can be tested empirically rather than only philosophically.

This article therefore proceeds in four parts, corresponding to four specific objectives. First, it analyzes the continued relevance of Marx's class and conflict theory for reading contemporary socioeconomic inequality, with particular reference to the Indonesian case. Second, it examines Marx's critique of religion in detail and places it in systematic comparison with the responses of Islamic scholars, including but not limited to Ibn Khaldun, Sayyid Qutb, Ali Shariati, Ismail al-Faruqi, Fazlur Rahman, and Azyumardi Azra. Third, it analyzes the historical and contemporary role of religion - Islam specifically - in confronting structural injustice, treating Indonesian anticolonial resistance as a central case. Fourth, it offers a theoretical synthesis that connects Marxist structural analysis with Islamic ethical-transformative thought, with the aim of producing an account of society more complete than either tradition offers alone. The remainder of the article is organized accordingly: a discussion of method - covering the study's philosophical orientation, data sources, and analytic technique - followed by findings and discussion structured

around the four objectives above, and a conclusion that draws out the theoretical and practical implications of the synthesis proposed.

METHOD

Philosophical and Methodological Foundations

This study is positioned within an interpretivist, qualitative paradigm, on the premise that the question it asks - whether Marx's account of religion's social function transfers across radically different religious traditions and historical contexts - is not the kind of question a quantitative instrument can resolve. What is at stake is the meaning and function that theorists, across two distinct intellectual traditions, have attributed to social structures and religious practice, and meaning of this kind is properly recovered through close reading and comparative interpretation rather than measurement (Lawrence, 2014). The study adopts library research (library research) as its specific design: a systematic, qualitative analysis of primary and secondary texts rather than of human informants, on the grounds that the object of inquiry - the internal logic and historical reception of a body of theory - exists most directly in textual form (Creswell, 2014).

This orientation carries a specific philosophical commitment worth making explicit: the study treats theoretical traditions, Marxist and Islamic alike, as living arguments rather than museum pieces. Marx's claims about religion are read here as claims that remain falsifiable against historical and contemporary evidence, not as artifacts to be merely summarized. Correspondingly, the Islamic scholarly responses examined are read as substantive counter-arguments engaging Marx on his own terms - disputing his evidence and his generalizations - rather than as confessional statements to be reported neutrally alongside Marx without genuine confrontation between the two. This is a deliberate departure from a purely descriptive history-of-ideas approach, and it is the reason the study's analytic technique (discussed below) combines content analysis with explicitly comparative and critical-reflective procedures.

A further orientating commitment concerns scope. The study does not attempt a comprehensive survey of either Marxist theory or Islamic political thought, both of which are far too vast for any single article to encompass. It instead selects representative figures and texts chosen for their direct relevance to the specific claims under examination - Marx's accounts of class antagonism and religious ideology - and for their influence within the secondary literature that has grown up around those claims. The selection is therefore purposive rather than exhaustive, a standard and appropriate choice for qualitative literature-based research operating under realistic scope constraints (Creswell, 2014).

Data Generation Techniques

The study's primary data consist of Marx's own foundational texts: The Communist Manifesto (with Engels, 1848), A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right (1843), and, for the discussion of class and alienation specifically, relevant passages from Capital (1867) as reconstructed and contextualized in the secondary literature on Marxist class theory. These primary texts were supplemented, on the Islamic side, by primary or near-primary sources for each scholar discussed: Ibn Khaldun's Muqaddimah for the concept of `asabiyyah, Sayyid Qutb's Ma`alim fi al-Tariq (Milestones) for the critique of religion-as-opium and the alternative vision of Islam as liberation, Ali Shariati's Religion versus Religion for the explicit Islamic liberation-theology framework developed in direct dialogue with Marxism, Ismail al-Faruqi's work on the Islamization of knowledge, and Fazlur Rahman's Islam and Modernity for the ethical-juristic concept of social welfare (maslahah).

Secondary data were drawn from two further categories of source. The first is the established sociological literature interpreting and extending Marx, including Anthony Giddens's classical comparative study of Marx, Durkheim, and Weber and George Ritzer's standard sociological-theory text, supplemented by recent peer-reviewed reconstructions of Marxist class theory addressing the alienation-exploitation relationship directly (Øversveen & Kelly, 2023)

and recent peer-reviewed treatments of Marx's critique of religion specifically, situating it within its nineteenth-century German philosophical context (Pedersen, 2015) and assessing its contemporary sociological standing (Khan, 2019). The second category is contemporary, Scopus- and DOI-indexed scholarship on the Islamic scholars discussed, including detailed treatments of Ali Shariati's revolutionary Islamic thought and its contemporary relevance (Nugroho & Surwandono, 2017) and of Peter Berger's sociology of religious legitimation considered as a partial bridge between the Marxist and the religious-studies literatures (Hjelm, 2019).

Data collection proceeded in three stages across a period of approximately four months. In the first stage, the research team identified and obtained Marx's primary texts and the core texts of each Islamic scholar under study, prioritizing scholarly editions and recognized translations. In the second stage, the team conducted a systematic search of academic databases - including journal aggregators and the Scopus discovery layer accessible through the researchers' institutional access - using search terms combining "Marx," "religion," "opium," "class," "conflict theory," and the name of each Islamic scholar under study, restricting results where possible to peer-reviewed journal articles published within the last ten years, consistent with the journal's stated preference for recent primary scholarship. Articles identified through this search were screened for direct relevance to the study's four objectives and for verifiable bibliographic completeness, including a resolvable DOI wherever the publishing venue assigns one. In the third stage, the research team supplemented this database search with Indonesia-specific empirical data, principally Statistics Indonesia's (BPS) official Gini ratio releases, to ground the discussion of contemporary inequality in verifiable, government-sourced figures rather than secondary estimates.

Data Analysis

Three analytic techniques were applied in combination. The first is content analysis, used to systematically identify and categorize the specific claims each primary and secondary source makes about

social class, conflict, and the social function of religion (Krippendorff, 2018). Each source was coded for its position on four recurring questions: (1) What is the material or spiritual origin of religion? (2) What social function does religion perform - legitimation, consolation, mobilization, or some combination? (3) What is the relationship between religious practice and structural economic inequality? (4) What does the source propose, if anything, as a resolution to that relationship? Coding these four questions consistently across both the Marxist and the Islamic literatures made systematic comparison possible.

The second technique is comparative analysis, applied specifically to the positions Marx and the Islamic scholars under study take on each of the four coding questions above. The comparison is structured rather than impressionistic: for each scholar discussed, the analysis identifies the specific point or points of agreement and disagreement with Marx's position, rather than offering only a general characterization of "Islamic" disagreement with "Marxist" thought. This structured comparison is presented in summary form in Table 1 in the findings section below.

The third technique is critical-reflective analysis, used to move beyond comparison toward synthesis - asking not only where Marx and the Islamic tradition disagree, but what a defensible contemporary theoretical position would need to incorporate from each. This step is the basis for the theoretical-contribution discussion that concludes the findings section.

Throughout, the analysis aims at what might be called interpretive triangulation: no single claim about a scholar's position is accepted into the analysis without corroboration from at least two independent sources - typically the primary text itself and at least one peer-reviewed secondary source discussing that text - a procedure intended to substitute, in a literature-based design, for the member-checking and triangulation strategies more familiar from interview-based qualitative research. Quotations from primary sources are kept short and are paraphrased wherever paraphrase preserves the original

meaning without loss of precision, consistent with standard practice in textual social-science research. No human subjects were involved in this research; accordingly, no institutional ethics review was required, though the study adheres to standard academic conventions regarding accurate attribution and the avoidance of misrepresentation of any source's position.

Theoretical Framework and Conceptual Model

The conceptual model guiding this study's analysis integrates two theoretical traditions that are not usually placed in direct dialogue: Marxist historical materialism, as reconstructed by contemporary alienation-centered class theory, and Islamic socio-religious thought, organized here around three core concepts - `adl (justice), `asabiyyah (social solidarity), and the defense of the mustadh`afin (the oppressed). The model treats these not as two separate frameworks to be compared from the outside, but as two partial accounts of the same underlying phenomenon: the relationship between material social structure and the normative or spiritual frameworks through which societies interpret and respond to that structure.

On the Marxist side, the model follows the reconstruction of class as constituted by two related but distinct processes: exploitation, in which the surplus value generated by labor is extracted by those who own productive capital, and alienation, in which that extracted surplus is not merely possessed by capitalists for personal consumption but reinvested as capital - an impersonal, self-expanding power that comes to dominate the conditions of social development itself (Øversveen & Kelly, 2023). This distinction matters for the present study because it clarifies what, precisely, Marx's theory of religion is meant to explain: not personal psychological consolation in the abstract, but a specific ideological function within a specific structure of domination, in which religious belief renders that domination tolerable by relocating the promise of justice to a transcendent register inaccessible to material contestation.

On the Islamic side, the model draws on Ibn Khaldun's pre-modern sociological insight that religiously grounded `asabiyyah - the bond of mutual solidarity within a group - can function as a basis for political legitimacy and, crucially, for successful resistance to an established but no longer legitimate ruling order, and on the twentieth-century liberationist reformulation of this insight by Qutb, Shariati, al-Faruqi, and Rahman, each of whom, from a different angle, argues that authentic religious commitment generates rather than dissolves the demand for social justice. The conceptual model treats these two strands as jointly necessary: Marx's structural analysis identifies where injustice originates and how it reproduces itself materially, while the Islamic liberationist strand identifies a resource - moral-religious conviction - capable of mobilizing resistance to that injustice that a purely materialist account, by its own theoretical commitments, cannot adequately explain. The model is represented schematically in Figure 1, which depicts material structure (ownership of productive resources) and normative-religious consciousness (`adl, `asabiyyah, mustadh`afin) as two distinct but interacting inputs into the outcome the study is ultimately interested in explaining: organized social resistance to structural injustice.

RESULTS AND EMPIRICAL FINDINGS

Relevance of Marx's Theory of Social Class and Conflict

Karl Marx's (1818-1883) theory of social class remains, more than a century and a half after its formulation, one of the most analytically productive frameworks available for reading economic inequality and power dynamics in contemporary society. Marx developed the theory as a direct critique of nineteenth-century capitalism, arguing that the system generates social stratification organized fundamentally around ownership of the means of production rather than around income, status, or any of the other variables more familiar to non-Marxist stratification research (Marx, 2014). Society, on this view, divides into two principal classes: the bourgeoisie, who own capital and the apparatus of production, and the proletariat, who possess nothing to sell but their own labor power (Marx & Engels, 2021).

The relationship between these two classes is not one of equal exchange but of structural domination. Recent reconstructions of this claim distinguish two analytically separate mechanisms by which that domination operates, a distinction the original Marxist literature often left implicit. The first mechanism is exploitation in the narrow sense: the bourgeoisie profits from owning productive capital, while the proletariat must sell its labor cheaply enough to survive, with the difference between what workers produce and what they are paid - the surplus value - appropriated by the owners of capital as profit (Øversveen & Kelly, 2023). The second, and theoretically deeper, mechanism is alienation: the surplus extracted from labor is not simply consumed by capitalists for personal benefit but reinvested as capital, becoming an autonomous, self-expanding power that reshapes the very conditions under which future labor and future social development occur. On this reading, what distinguishes capitalist class domination from earlier forms - feudal serfdom, for instance - is precisely that capitalists do not exploit workers merely to enrich themselves directly, in the manner of a feudal lord extracting tribute, but to fund continuous reinvestment, growth, and competitive expansion, a dynamic that gives capitalism its remarkable productive power while simultaneously deepening labor's structural dependence on capital (Øversveen & Kelly, 2023).

This two-mechanism account answers an objection that might otherwise seem fatal to Marx's framework: if capitalism is exploitative, why did living standards for many workers in advanced capitalist economies rise substantially across the twentieth century, in apparent contradiction to Marx's expectation of progressive immiseration? The alienation-centered reconstruction supplies an answer. Even workers whose absolute material conditions improve remain alienated in Marx's deeper sense, because they continue to lack effective control over the product of their labor and over the direction of social development that labor collectively makes possible; a well-paid worker whose labor is nonetheless directed by capital toward ends - environmentally destructive production, surveillance infrastructure, planned product obsolescence - that the worker has no power to redirect remains, in this

analysis, a structurally alienated worker regardless of wage level (Øversveen & Kelly, 2023). This reframing matters directly for the Indonesian case under discussion here, since it allows the analysis to register persistent structural inequality even during periods, like the recent past, when absolute poverty rates have been falling.

The literature review undertaken for this study indicates that Marx's bourgeois-proletarian framework remains directly applicable to reading patterns of inequality in Indonesia and other contemporary economies. Statistics Indonesia's official data record a Gini ratio of 0.388 in March 2023, the highest level recorded in the preceding five years, with the agency's own analysis attributing the increase specifically to the consumption of the wealthiest twenty percent of Indonesians rising while consumption among the bottom eighty percent stagnated or declined - producing a situation in which the richest fifth of the population accounted for over forty-six percent of total national household expenditure (BPS, 2023). The ratio eased marginally to 0.379 in March 2024 before rising again to 0.381 by September of that year, indicating that the underlying structural pattern, rather than reversing, has merely fluctuated within a persistently high band. This is, in the vocabulary developed above, a clear empirical signature of capital's continued capacity to capture a disproportionate share of the social surplus even during a period of measured economic growth and declining absolute poverty - exactly the pattern Marx's framework, rather than competing stratification theories organized around income distribution alone, is best equipped to explain, because it directs attention to the structural mechanism (differential capital ownership) generating the distributional outcome rather than only to the outcome itself.

This theoretical lens illuminates contemporary Indonesian social phenomena beyond the aggregate statistics. Labor mobilizations contesting minimum-wage policy, student demonstrations against legislation widely perceived to favor capital owners over ordinary citizens, and recurring agrarian conflicts over land and resource rights are not, on this analysis, episodic disturbances but the predictable surface expression of the underlying class antagonism Marx identified.

The pattern of class struggle Marx described in The Communist Manifesto remains visible in these dynamics, though in a more structurally complex form than Marx's nineteenth-century European context presents, since contemporary Indonesian class conflict is mediated by additional factors - religious affiliation, regional and ethnic identity, and the specific institutional architecture of a post-authoritarian democracy - that Marx's original framework did not need to theorize.

The same lens clarifies subtler, less visibly confrontational forms of contemporary economic inequality: low-wage labor arrangements, the outsourcing of employment relationships to avoid the legal obligations of direct employment, and the concentration of wealth among a comparatively small economic elite. Even where the exploitation involved does not take the visually dramatic form of nineteenth-century factory conditions, the underlying relation of domination persists, operating today through the less visible mechanisms of neoliberal globalization, privatization, and international capital mobility - what one recent reconstruction of Marxist theory describes as the "subsumption" of an ever-wider range of social and productive activity under the logic of capital accumulation, extending even into domains, such as agricultural seed patents and platform-mediated labor, that have no obvious nineteenth-century analogue (Øversveen & Kelly, 2023).

It is worth noting, in the interest of theoretical balance, that this reconstructed Marxist framework is not without its own internal critics. The "death of class" thesis advanced within sociology in the 1990s argued that other axes of stratification - education, cultural taste, gender, ethnicity - had become at least as analytically significant as class position in explaining social outcomes in advanced societies, and the alienation-centered reconstruction discussed above is itself a response to a related criticism: that orthodox Marxist class analysis reduces too readily to "economism," treating class purely as a mechanism of income distribution and thereby losing what is theoretically distinctive about a Marxist, as opposed to a Weberian or Bourdieusian, account of

stratification (Øversveen & Kelly, 2023). The present analysis takes the view that this criticism is best answered, as the reconstructed framework attempts to do, by deepening rather than abandoning Marx's category of class - and that the Indonesian data reviewed above, in which a specifically capital-ownership-linked pattern of consumption inequality is directly observable in the government's own statistics, supports the continued analytical priority of class over competing explanatory variables for this particular empirical pattern, whatever may be true for other patterns the data do not address.

Marx's Critique of Religion and the Response of Islamic Scholars

Karl Marx is known above all for one controversial formulation: "religion is the opium of the people." The phrase, drawn from the 1843 introduction to A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right, is frequently quoted by both believers and atheists in isolation from its surrounding argument, a decontextualization that, as recent intellectual-historical scholarship has shown in detail, obscures rather than clarifies what Marx actually meant (Pedersen, 2015). The fuller passage situates the opium metaphor within a more careful claim: religion is "the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions" before it is anything else - a genuine, even sympathetic, human response to genuine suffering, not merely a tool of deliberate deception (Boer, 2011). Marx's critique, properly read, is not a rejection of religious believers as fools or frauds but a structural claim about the social function religious belief performs under specific historical conditions of exploitation.

For Marx, religion performs this function in two related ways. First, it serves as consolation: by promising happiness in an afterlife, religion makes the oppressed willing to accept suffering in this one, displacing the demand for justice from the material world, where it might generate political resistance, into a transcendent register where it cannot (Omonijo et al., 2016). Second, and more instrumentally, religion serves as legitimation: doctrines of fate, providence, or

obedience to authority can be - and historically have been - deployed by ruling classes to justify existing social arrangements as divinely sanctioned rather than humanly constructed and therefore humanly contestable. Within Marx's framework of historical materialism, religion is consequently not a transcendent or autonomous phenomenon but a product of specific material and economic conditions, belonging to what Marx called the ideological superstructure rather than the economic base; on this view, religion would diminish of its own accord were the economic injustice and exploitation generating the suffering it consoles to be abolished (Khan, 2019).

A useful theoretical bridge between Marx's account and the broader sociology of religion is supplied by Peter Berger's concept of religion as a "sacred canopy" - a socially constructed, all-embracing symbolic order that stabilizes society against the constant threat of anomie by grounding the existing social arrangement in a sacred, rather than merely human, cosmos (Vandenberghe, 2018). Berger's framework, despite Berger's own professed hostility to Marxism in his later career, draws extensively and explicitly on Marx, particularly on the concept of alienation, and a recent critical reassessment of Berger's work argues that his theory of religious "legitimation" - the process by which a constructed social order comes to appear natural, inevitable, and beyond question - converges substantially with the Marxist critique of ideology, even though Berger himself resisted following that convergence to its critical, power-attentive conclusion (Hjelm, 2019). This convergence is analytically useful here because it shows that Marx's intuition about religion's legitimating function is not an isolated Marxist eccentricity but a recurring insight across otherwise quite different schools of the sociology of religion - which in turn raises the stakes of the Islamic critique examined below, since that critique is contesting not merely one theorist's claim but a broader sociological tendency to treat religious legitimation as inherently conservative.

From an Islamic perspective, however, Marx's generalization is considered reductive, and Muslim scholars across the past century have

responded with a range of distinct, though convergent, arguments. Writing in the fourteenth century, well before Marx, Ibn Khaldun had already developed in the Muqaddimah an account of religion's social function strikingly different from the one Marx would later generalize: religion, for Ibn Khaldun, builds `asabiyyah - group solidarity - and supplies a basis for political legitimacy, but it does so by binding a community together against external domination and internal disorder, not by reconciling a community to domination already imposed upon it (bin Khaldun & Abdurrahman, 2001). On this account, religion functions as unifying social energy capable of strengthening civilizational structure, and as a moral check against tyranny and injustice, rather than as a mechanism for perpetuating either.

Twentieth-century Muslim scholars extend this counter-argument directly against Marx's specific formulation. Sayyid Qutb (1964), in Ma`alim fi al-Tariq, insists that Islam exists precisely to liberate human beings from domination by other human beings - a direct inversion of Marx's claim that religion perpetuates domination (Quthb, 1992). Ali Shariati (1980), an Iranian sociologist trained in Paris and deeply versed in Marxist theory, takes the most direct and theoretically developed position of any scholar examined here: in Religion versus Religion, Shariati concedes that some religion does function as Marx describes - what he terms the "religion of the status quo" - but argues that Islam, properly understood, is revolutionary, siding explicitly with the mustadh`afin, the oppressed, against their oppressors (Nugroho & Surwandono, 2017). Shariati's framework, developed in direct, sustained dialogue with Marxist theory rather than in ignorance of it, is among the most sophisticated Islamic responses to Marx precisely because it does not deny that religion can function ideologically in Marx's sense; it instead argues that this ideological function describes only one historically contingent form of religion, against which an alternative, liberationist form of the same religion can be - and historically has been - mobilized.

Ismail al-Faruqi (1982), in his program for the Islamization of Knowledge, argues from a different angle that Marx fundamentally misunderstands the nature of religion as such: Islam, on al-Faruqi's

account, is not an instrument of the ruling class but a source of ethical value that orients knowledge and society toward justice, and is therefore not reducible to a mere ideological tranquilizer (Al-Faruqi, 1986). Fazlur Rahman, writing on the ethical function of Islamic law and theology, emphasizes the centrality of social justice (`adl) and collective welfare (maslahah) to Islamic ethics, presenting these not as decorative theological commitments layered atop an otherwise quietist faith but as organizing principles that orient Islamic social thought toward active engagement with structural injustice (Rahman, 1984). Azyumardi Azra (2002) adds a further, historically specific objection: Marx's critique of religion, Azra argues, is itself Eurocentric, generalized from the particular historical experience of the European church's institutional alliance with feudal and then capitalist power, and does not transfer cleanly to traditions where the historical record runs the other direction - as it does, Azra notes, in cases where Islam became a primary engine of resistance to colonialism across the Muslim world rather than colonialism's religious accomplice (Lalu Abdurrahman Wahid, 2022).

This last point deserves particular emphasis, because it identifies precisely where Marx's generalization overreaches. Marx's account of religion was developed from a specific historical case: the institutional entanglement of European Christian churches with feudal aristocracy and, subsequently, with industrial capital. That case supplies real and well-documented evidence for the legitimation function Marx describes. But a single historical case, however well documented, cannot establish a universal claim about "religion" as a category, and the Islamic scholarly literature reviewed here supplies multiple independent cases - Ibn Khaldun's theoretical account, Qutb's and Shariati's twentieth-century reformulations, and, as the next section discusses, the documented historical record of Islamically organized anticolonial resistance - in which the relationship between religion and power runs in the opposite direction from the one Marx generalized. M. Kamal Hassan, writing in Intellectual Discourse, makes a parallel point with specific reference to the distinction between religion as alienation and religion as ethical-spiritual empowerment, arguing that

Islam, properly practiced, does not alienate believers from social reality but equips them with spiritual and ethical resources for confronting structural injustice directly (Nabil Amir & Abdul Rahman, 2025).

Table 1 summarizes the systematic comparison developed across this section, organized around the same four coding questions applied throughout the analysis: the origin of religion, its social function, its relationship to the oppressed, and the proposed resolution to religiously legitimated injustice.

Table 1. Comparative Summary: Marx and Islamic Thinkers on Religion, Class, and Justice

Dimension	**Karl Marx**	**Islamic Thinkers**
Nature/origin of religion	Product of material conditions; an ideology arising from socioeconomic inequality	Divine revelation; a source of moral value, transcendent meaning, and civilizational guidance
Social function	Consolation for suffering and legitimation of ruling-class power	Instrument of justice, social solidarity (`asabiyyah), and liberation from oppression
Relationship to the oppressed	Induces resignation and acceptance of suffering	Mobilizes and defends the rights of the weak and oppressed (mustadh`afin)
Proposed resolution to injustice	Abolish capitalism; religion will recede of its own accord	Strengthen religious values to establish social justice and actively resist tyranny

The comparison summarized in Table 1 indicates that Marx's position cannot be generalized without qualification, particularly once religion is examined within the Islamic tradition specifically. The Muslim scholarly critique surveyed here substantially enriches the analysis of religion's social function, demonstrating that religion operates not solely as an instrument of power, as Marx's framework anticipates, but also, and in the cases examined here predominantly, as

a transformative energy directed against entrenched power. This does not mean that Marx's account is simply wrong as a general matter - the convergence with Berger's sociology of legitimation discussed above suggests the mechanism Marx identified is real and recurring - but it does mean that the mechanism is one possibility among others, contingent on a religious tradition's specific historical relationship to ruling-class power, rather than a necessary feature of religion as such.

The Role of Religion in Confronting Structural Injustice

The literature reviewed for this study indicates that Islam possesses substantial capacity to respond to structural injustice in ways that exceed mere consolation. Islamic values - `adl (justice), ummah (collective solidarity), and amar ma`ruf nahi munkar (the obligation to enjoin good and forbid wrong, understood as a mandate for active moral and social engagement) - supply a spiritual and ethical foundation for resisting exploitation that operates in a register Marx's framework does not anticipate: not displacement of the demand for justice into a transcendent register, but active religious mobilization of that demand within the material world (Pani Dias, 2024).

Indonesian history supplies sustained, documented evidence for this pattern. Islam played a central role in mobilizing resistance to Dutch colonialism across multiple regions and historical periods: Pangeran Diponegoro's Java War (1825-1830), framed explicitly in religious and millenarian terms; the Padri movement in the Minangkabau highlands of West Sumatra, which combined Islamic reform with armed resistance to both indigenous adat authorities and, subsequently, Dutch intervention; and the protracted Acehnese resistance to Dutch annexation, which drew extensively on Islamic legal and eschatological vocabulary to sustain a multi-decade insurgency that colonial authorities never fully suppressed (Saribunga & Hasaruddin, 2024).

These cases share a common structure that directly inverts Marx's expectation: in each, religious commitment did not produce passive acceptance of an exploitative colonial order but instead

supplied the organizational framework, the moral vocabulary, and the mobilizing energy for sustained resistance to that order. The historical record demonstrates that religion functioned in these cases not merely as consolation but as a vehicle of social and political mobilization - direct empirical refutation, within at least this set of cases, of Marx's reduction of religion to opium, and simultaneously a confirmation that Islam can function as an instrument of liberation rather than a tool that lulls the population into submission.

It is worth being precise about the scope of what this evidence establishes. It does not establish that religion never functions as Marx described - the European historical case from which Marx generalized remains substantially accurate on its own terms, and even within the Islamic world, scholars including Shariati explicitly acknowledge that a "religion of the status quo" exists alongside the revolutionary religion he advocates (Nugroho & Surwandono, 2017). What the Indonesian cases establish is narrower but still theoretically decisive: that religion's relationship to structural power is not fixed by religion's nature as such but is contingent on the specific historical and institutional position a given religious tradition occupies relative to ruling power at a given moment. Religion allied institutionally with a ruling class, as European Christianity often was, tends to legitimate that class's power; religion mobilized by a colonized or otherwise dominated population against an external or internal oppressor tends to do the opposite. This is a more modest claim than either "Marx was simply wrong about religion" or "Islam is simply immune to ideological function," but it is, on the evidence reviewed here, the more defensible one.

Theoretical Contribution: Toward an Integrated Framework

The findings developed above indicate that Marx's conflict theory supplies a robust structural framework for analyzing socioeconomic injustice, while Islamic thought supplies a moral and spiritual foundation for resisting oppression that Marx's own framework, by its own theoretical commitments, is poorly positioned to explain. Where the two frameworks are connected rather than treated as mutually exclusive alternatives, a more comprehensive

understanding of society becomes available: Marx supplies a material-structural analysis of the inequality that actually occurs in a given society, identifying its mechanism and its beneficiaries with a precision the Islamic literature, oriented more toward normative ethics than toward structural-economic analysis, generally does not attempt to match.

Islam, complementarily, supplies an ethical-transformative account of the values that orient resistance to that inequality, addressing a question - why do people who recognize their own exploitation nonetheless often fail to resist it, and what, when they do resist, supplies the moral conviction sustaining that resistance - that Marx's framework, for all its analytic power regarding structure, leaves comparatively underspecified.

This complementarity is not merely additive. The alienation-centered reconstruction of Marxist class theory discussed earlier in this article already gestures toward exactly the kind of resource the Islamic literature supplies in fuller form: contemporary Marxist theorists have begun arguing that the politics of class needs to shift "from inequality to unfreedom" - from a narrow focus on redistributing material resources toward a broader concern with the lived experience of domination and the positive vision of a non-alienated form of social life that might replace it (Øversveen & Kelly, 2023). This shift in emphasis, internal to recent Marxist theory itself, converges with what the Islamic liberationist tradition examined in this article has offered all along: not merely a diagnosis of material deprivation, but a moral vocabulary - `adl, mustadh`afin, the obligation to confront wrongdoing - capable of sustaining the kind of long-term, often costly collective action that material self-interest alone, on Marx's own analysis of why individual workers often fail to act on their objective class interest, does not reliably generate.

The theoretical contribution this article therefore proposes is an integrated framework in which Marxist structural-material analysis and Islamic ethical-transformative thought function as complementary rather than competing accounts of the same social reality. Practically,

this integration carries direct relevance for contemporary social movements confronting structural injustice: a movement informed only by material grievance, without an animating moral-religious vocabulary, may struggle to sustain the collective commitment Marx's own theory of alienation suggests is necessary to overcome structural domination; a movement informed only by religious conviction, without a clear structural diagnosis of where economic power actually lies and how it reproduces itself, may direct its moral energy at symptoms rather than causes.

The Indonesian anticolonial movements discussed above arguably succeeded, where they did succeed, precisely because they combined both elements - a structural grievance against colonial extraction and a religious vocabulary capable of sustaining resistance to that extraction over years or decades. This article's central theoretical claim is that this combination, rather than being a historical accident specific to anticolonial Indonesia, identifies a generalizable relationship between material structure and moral-religious consciousness that future research on social movements, inequality, and religion would do well to take as a starting hypothesis rather than treating Marxist and religious frameworks as theoretical rivals between which a researcher must simply choose.

DISCUSSION

The findings reported above carry implications that extend in several directions: theoretical, methodological, and practical. Theoretically, the central implication is that the long-standing tendency, in both Marxist and religious-studies scholarship, to treat Marx's theory of class and his theory of religion as a single, indivisible package - to be either accepted wholesale or rejected wholesale - is not well supported once each claim is examined against the available evidence on its own terms. The class-conflict component of Marx's theory, particularly as reconstructed through the alienation-exploitation distinction developed in recent sociological scholarship, continues to track observable patterns of inequality with considerable precision, including in a context - contemporary Indonesia - quite remote from

the nineteenth-century European industrial economy Marx had directly in view (Øversveen & Kelly, 2023).

The religion component does not transfer with comparable fidelity, because it was derived from a historically specific case - the European church's documented institutional alliance with feudal and capitalist ruling power - and generalized to religion as a category in a way the comparative evidence assembled here, particularly from the Islamic and Indonesian historical record, does not support.

This finding bears directly on the long-running scholarly conversation about Marx's continued relevance. A substantial portion of that conversation, both celebratory and critical, treats "is Marx still relevant" as a single yes-or-no question, implicitly assuming his various theoretical claims rise or fall together. The present analysis suggests this framing obscures more than it reveals. Marx remains highly relevant as a theorist of structural economic domination; he is considerably less reliable as a theorist of religion's universal social function, not because his sociological instinct - that ideology can legitimate power - was mistaken, but because he tested that instinct against too narrow a range of historical cases to support the universal conclusion he drew from it. Berger's later sociology of religious legitimation, despite Berger's own anti-Marxist self-presentation, effectively inherits and extends the narrower, defensible version of Marx's insight, while the Islamic liberationist tradition examined here supplies the comparative evidence that exposes the limits of the broader, indefensible version (Hjelm, 2019; Vandenberghe, 2018).

For stakeholders engaged in contemporary Indonesian social and political life - policymakers concerned with inequality, religious leaders and organizations, and the social movements this article has discussed - the practical implications follow fairly directly from the theoretical ones. First, Indonesia's persistently high Gini ratio, hovering near 0.38 across the period examined in this study, indicates that class-based structural inequality is not a historical curiosity but an active and measurable feature of the contemporary economy, one that official data

continue to attribute specifically to disproportionate consumption and wealth growth among the wealthiest income quintile (BPS, 2023).

Policy responses framed purely in terms of aggregate growth or absolute poverty reduction, without direct attention to the distributional mechanism Marx's framework identifies, are likely to leave this structural pattern largely undisturbed even where they succeed by their own stated metrics. Second, and more specifically to this article's argument, religious institutions and movements concerned with social justice need not treat Marxist-influenced structural analysis as inherently hostile to religious commitment; the Islamic scholarly tradition reviewed here - from Ibn Khaldun through Shariati to Fazlur Rahman - demonstrates a long precedent for combining rigorous structural critique of injustice with explicitly religious motivation and vocabulary, a combination this article's findings suggest is not merely historically available but theoretically coherent.

Several limitations of this study should be acknowledged directly. First, as a qualitative literature-analysis design, the study's findings rest on the interpretation of texts rather than on original empirical fieldwork; while this is an appropriate and well-established method for the comparative-theoretical question the study poses, it means the study cannot speak directly to, for instance, how ordinary believers in contemporary Indonesia themselves understand the relationship between their religious practice and their experience of economic inequality - a question that would require interview- or survey-based research the present design does not include. Second, the study's selection of Islamic scholars, while chosen for their direct relevance and influence, is necessarily partial; a comparable analysis could be conducted using a different set of scholars - drawing more heavily on, for instance, contemporary progressive Indonesian Islamic thought beyond the figures discussed here - and might surface additional nuance the present selection does not capture. Third, the study's use of Indonesian historical cases of anticolonial resistance, while well documented in the secondary literature cited, necessarily simplifies historical episodes that involved considerable internal complexity and contestation - the Padri movement, for instance,

included substantial intra-Muslim conflict over the proper relationship between Islamic reform and existing adat institutions, a complexity the brief treatment here cannot fully register.

Finally, the study's comparative method, while structured around consistent coding questions, inevitably involves interpretive judgment in characterizing each scholar's position, and other researchers working from the same primary texts might reasonably emphasize different aspects of, for instance, Shariati's or Qutb's thought than the aspects emphasized here. These limitations do not, in the present analysis, undermine the study's central comparative claim, but they do mark directions along which the claim could be further tested and refined.

CONCLUSION

This article set out to examine Karl Marx's thought on social class, conflict theory, and religion as the opium of the people, and to test that thought specifically against the Islamic intellectual tradition's own account of religion's social function. The analysis indicates that Marx's class and conflict framework remains substantially relevant for reading contemporary patterns of socioeconomic inequality: Indonesia's persistently elevated Gini ratio, and the specific mechanism - disproportionate consumption and wealth growth among the wealthiest income quintile - to which official statistics attribute it, exhibits precisely the structural dynamic of capital accumulation and labor dependence Marx's theory, particularly as reconstructed through the contemporary alienation-exploitation distinction, anticipates (BPS, 2023; Øversveen & Kelly, 2023).

Marx's critique of religion as "the opium of the people," by contrast, cannot be applied without substantial qualification, especially within societies, such as Indonesia, in which religious commitment is pervasive and historically entangled with resistance to, rather than collaboration with, structural oppression. The perspectives of Islamic scholars examined here - Ibn Khaldun, Sayyid Qutb, Ali Shariati, Ismail

al-Faruqi, Fazlur Rahman, and Azyumardi Azra - converge on the position that religion, and Islam specifically, is not merely a narcotic that lulls believers into passive acceptance of injustice, but a moral, spiritual, and social force capable of mobilizing believers toward transformation and the active pursuit of justice. This finding stands as both a critique of, and a necessary complement to, Marx's thought, which the present analysis judges to be reductive in its treatment of religion precisely where it is most analytically powerful in its treatment of class.

A reflection on religion's empirical role in confronting structural injustice reinforces this conclusion. Islam has functioned, in the documented Indonesian historical record, as a transformative force capable of awakening collective consciousness against structural oppression, with values such as `adl (justice), ukhuwah (brotherhood and solidarity), and the defense of the mustadh`afin (the oppressed) positioning religion as a significant instrument for confronting social conflict rather than merely enduring it. This article's specific theoretical contribution is to integrate these two findings - Marx's continued structural relevance and Islam's documented transformative capacity - into a single framework, in which material-structural analysis and ethical-religious mobilization are treated as complementary resources for understanding and responding to injustice, rather than as theoretical alternatives between which a researcher, or a social movement, must choose.

Future research might extend this analysis in at least three directions. First, empirical, interview- or survey-based research with contemporary Indonesian religious and labor movements could test directly whether the theoretical complementarity proposed here - between structural grievance and religious mobilization - is in fact how participants in those movements themselves understand their own motivations, a question the present literature-based design is not positioned to answer. Second, comparative research extending the analysis to other religious traditions confronting structural injustice - Latin American Catholic liberation theology offers an especially direct point of comparison, given its own explicit, decades-long engagement with Marxist theory -

could test whether the pattern identified here for Islam generalizes further or is specific to particular doctrinal and historical features of the Islamic case. Third, further theoretical work could extend the alienation-centered reconstruction of Marxist class theory discussed in this article specifically into dialogue with Islamic economic ethics, a literature this article has touched only briefly but which offers substantial unexplored potential for developing the integrated framework this article proposes into a more fully specified theoretical model.

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