

Religion and Technology: Reinterpreting Marx's Opium of the People

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Abstract: This study aims to analyze the relevance of Karl Marx's concept of religion as the "opium of the people" in the context of contemporary technological development. The research is motivated by the ambivalent role of religion in modern society, where the advancement of science and technology simultaneously strengthens rationality while also generating existential crises and a loss of meaning. This study employs a qualitative approach with a library research method, focusing on critical analysis of Marx's philosophical texts and their relevance to current social phenomena. The findings indicate that religion possesses an ambivalent function: it serves as a source of psychological comfort and existential stability, yet it can also function as an ideological mechanism that obscures social reality and hinders transformation. In the digital era, the "opium" function of religion finds its parallel in technology, which similarly operates as a means of escaping human suffering. Nevertheless, this study argues that religion cannot be reduced to mere illusion, as it continues to play a significant role as a source of values, reflection, and social transformation.

Keywords karl marx; religion; opium; technology; existential reflection

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INTRODUCTION

The increasingly rapid development of technology in the contemporary era has prompted humans to reconsider various classical schools of thought that were previously debated by philosophers. Schools such as empiricism, rationalism, and skepticism have regained relevance in the context of the modern world, which is characterized by rapid advances in science and technology ([M Musakkir, 2021](#)). From an empiricist perspective, the truth of knowledge is determined by the ability to prove it concretely through sensory experience, such as seeing, touching, or directly experiencing it. Meanwhile, rationalism emphasizes that truth originates from reason; something is considered true as long as it can be accepted logically, even if it cannot always be empirically verified. On the other hand, skepticism argues that no truth can be accepted absolutely, and therefore everything remains open to doubt ([Rahman et al., 2023](#)).

In the context of technological advancement, these three schools of thought have contributed to the emergence of doubts about religion. Religion, which is inherently transcendent and beyond sensory experience, is often regarded as abstract and difficult to verify empirically. Consequently, religion tends to be reduced to a private matter whose validity depends solely on the subjective experience of individuals ([Heriyanti, 2022](#)). Within this framework, Karl Marx's thought becomes relevant, particularly his notion that religion is "the opium of the people." The

term “opium” refers to religion’s function as a tranquilizer that can make people complacent and less motivated to struggle for social transformation.

From Marx’s perspective, certain religious teachings may weaken the human spirit of resistance. Teachings about accepting suffering, viewing poverty as a blessing, and loving one’s enemies unconditionally can be interpreted as ideological mechanisms that pacify people in situations of injustice. In modern society, marked by scientific and technological progress, the relevance of such teachings is often questioned ([D Samarenna, 2017](#)). This creates the impression that religion hinders the development of rationality and human progress. However, this perspective does not entirely reflect the actual role of religion in human life. Existentially, human beings are limited and vulnerable to various forms of weakness, both physical and psychological. In such circumstances, religion can function as a source of strength and hope. Religion provides meaning to suffering and becomes a medium through which humans establish a relationship with God as the Creator. Therefore, religion cannot merely be reduced to a form of ideological addiction, but must also be understood as a source of existential meaning and spiritual resilience.

Several previous studies have examined the relationship between religion, modernity, and Karl Marx’s concept of religion as opium.

Some scholars have focused on Marx’s criticism of religion as an ideological tool that maintains social inequality, while others have analyzed the decline of religious authority in the modern technological era. In addition, a number of studies discuss how technological progress and scientific rationality encourage secularization and individualism in religious life. However, most of these studies primarily emphasize Marx’s negative critique of religion without sufficiently exploring the existential and spiritual dimensions that continue to make religion relevant in contemporary technological society. Furthermore, only a few studies specifically examine how religion simultaneously functions as both a source of social passivity and a source of existential meaning in the digital and technological age. Therefore, this research seeks to fill that gap by analyzing Karl Marx’s concept of religion as opium while also critically examining the continuing relevance and constructive role of religion in the midst of technological development and modern human existential crises.

Furthermore, in social life, religion plays a significant role in shaping human values. Values such as honesty, responsibility, solidarity, and compassion serve as ethical foundations for social life. Amidst the rapid flow of information and technological developments, these values are increasingly needed to maintain balance in social relations. Thus, religion plays a role not only in the private sphere but also has an important social dimension. Based on this description, a fundamental question arises that is the focus of this study: does the development of science and technology strengthen human understanding of religion, or weaken it and raise doubts about it? This formulation can be simplified as: How does technological modernity reinforce or challenge Karl Marx’s concept of religion as the “opium of the people” in contemporary society?

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative approach using library research methods. The qualitative approach was chosen because this research focuses on the conceptual and philosophical analysis of Karl Marx’s notion of religion as the “opium of the people” and its relevance within the context of technological modernity and contemporary secularization. More specifically, this study examines how technological development and modern rationality influence the role of religion, whether religion functions as a form of social pacification as criticized by Marx or continues to provide existential meaning for modern humans. According to Creswell, qualitative research is appropriate for exploring and interpreting social and philosophical phenomena through textual and contextual understanding ([Creswell & Creswell, 2017](#)). Meanwhile, library research allows

researchers to critically examine philosophical ideas through written sources and conceptual interpretation ([Zed, 2008](#)).

The data used in this study were obtained entirely from secondary sources, consisting of books, scientific journal articles, and academic documents related to Karl Marx's philosophy, philosophy of religion, secularization theory, and studies on technology and modern society. The data collection process was conducted through purposive sampling, in which sources were selected based on their relevance, credibility, and direct connection to the research topic. The researcher collected approximately 25–30 academic sources, including Marx's primary works such as *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right* and *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts*, as well as contemporary studies discussing religion in the technological era.

The theoretical framework of this study is grounded primarily in Karl Marx's theory of religion, especially his concept of religion as an ideological instrument that functions to alleviate human suffering while simultaneously maintaining social conditions. In addition, this study also draws on theories of secularization and modernity developed by thinkers such as Max Weber and Peter Berger to understand the relationship between religion, rationality, and technological society. These theories are used to analyze how technological progress affects religious consciousness and contemporary spiritual life.

The data analysis technique employed in this research is content analysis combined with a hermeneutic approach. Content analysis is used to identify and categorize key concepts related to religion, secularization, ideology, and technological modernity within Marx's writings and related scholarly literature. This approach is based on Krippendorff, ([2018](#)) theory that content analysis enables researchers to systematically interpret textual meanings within social and philosophical contexts. Meanwhile, the hermeneutic approach is used to interpret Marx's texts contextually and critically, both in relation to the historical background of nineteenth-century industrial society and the contemporary digital era. The hermeneutic perspective in this research is influenced by Gadamer's view that understanding is always shaped by historical consciousness and contextual interpretation ([Gadamer, 2013](#)).

The analysis process was carried out systematically through several stages, namely data collection, data reduction, categorization of themes, contextual interpretation, and critical-reflective conclusion drawing. Through this process, the study seeks to provide a deeper philosophical understanding of the relevance of Karl Marx's concept of religion as "opium" in the midst of technological development and the existential challenges faced by modern society.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Karl Marx's Concept of Religion and Its Relevance in the Technological Era

Karl Marx's concept of religion as the "opium of the people" has been interpreted differently by various scholars, especially in relation to modernity and technological development. Several studies argue that religion functions as a psychological consolation for individuals facing social suffering and alienation. Ayun et al., ([2024](#)), for instance, explain that religion provides emotional stability, hope, and existential meaning for marginalized groups experiencing poverty and powerlessness. In this perspective, religion is understood not merely as an illusion but also as a coping mechanism that helps individuals survive social pressures.

This interpretation emphasizes the positive psychological role of religion in maintaining human resilience amid modern social crises. However, other scholars highlight the ideological dimension of religion as emphasized by In this interpretation, religion becomes problematic because it encourages individuals to accept suffering as destiny rather than critically questioning unjust social structures. Similarly, [Siahaya et al., \(2020\)](#) emphasize that religion may reinforce

social passivity by legitimizing existing power relations. These studies support Marx's argument that religion can maintain the status quo by weakening social resistance and critical awareness.

The comparison between these studies shows an important tension in understanding religion. On the one hand, religion serves as a source of comfort and existential meaning; on the other hand, it may function ideologically by reducing critical consciousness. This dual function becomes increasingly relevant in the technological era. A Yokit, (2021) explains that Marx's metaphor of "opium" should not simply be understood as an insult to religion, but rather as a description of religion's calming function in society. In the nineteenth century, opium was widely used as a painkiller, and Marx used this analogy to illustrate how religion alleviates suffering without removing its social roots.

In the context of technological modernity, several scholars suggest that the role traditionally played by religion is now partially replaced or reinforced by digital media and technology. FJ Nugroho, (2019) argues that contemporary digital culture often creates forms of distraction that reduce critical social awareness, similar to the ideological function Marx attributed to religion. Social media, entertainment platforms, and digital consumer culture can provide temporary comfort and escape from social anxiety while simultaneously obscuring structural social problems. In this sense, technology may reproduce patterns similar to the "opium" function described by Marx.

Nevertheless, not all scholars agree that technology necessarily weakens religion. Some contemporary studies indicate that technological development also enables religion to adapt and expand through digital religious practices, online communities, and virtual spiritual engagement. This suggests that religion in the digital era does not simply disappear through secularization but undergoes transformation in form and expression. Therefore, the findings from previous literature reveal two contrasting tendencies: some studies emphasize technology's role in strengthening secularization and distraction, while others show that religion continues to provide existential meaning and spiritual support in modern society. Based on these differing perspectives, this research finds that Marx's concept of religion as "opium" remains relevant in the technological era, but its function has become more complex. Religion no longer operates solely through traditional institutions but also interacts with digital culture, media, and technological systems that can either weaken or reinforce human critical consciousness. Thus, the technological era does not simply eliminate religion; rather, it transforms the way religion functions within contemporary society.

Human Existence in Limitations

Religion is not a phenomenon born in a modern context, but has been present and deeply rooted in human life since ancient times. Conversely, technological development is a relatively new phenomenon, particularly since the advent of the digital era at the beginning of the 21st century (Firnando, 2023). Several studies indicate that the development of technology and science has significantly transformed human patterns of thought and behavior, including the interpretation and practice of religion in modern society. Technological modernity tends to promote rationalization and secularization, causing religion to shift from a collective social institution toward a more subjective and individualized experience (FJ Nugroho, 2019; Kalberg, 2013).

In this context, the thoughts of Karl Marx become relevant for analysis, particularly in viewing religion as a social phenomenon that serves a specific function in human life. Conceptually, Marx viewed religion as a social construct born of material conditions and social relations within society. Religion, from this perspective, functions not only as a belief system but also as a mechanism that can reduce human suffering, while also potentially becoming a tool for legitimizing certain social structures. However, the findings of this study suggest that religion should not be understood solely as an illusion or an ideological form of "opium," as it

continues to provide existential meaning, moral orientation, and psychological strength for individuals in contemporary society, but rather has a more complex existential dimension, particularly in shaping human relations with others, nature, and God.

Throughout its historical development, religion has faced various epistemological challenges, including criticism from rationalism, empiricism, and skepticism, which question the existence of God and the validity of religious experience. Nevertheless, religion remains a system of meaning that provides orientation for human life. This demonstrates that religion has a strong adaptive capacity in facing changing times, including amidst the increasingly rapid flow of technological development.

In the technological era, the influence of technology is not limited merely to the abundance of information, but also includes the transformation of communication patterns, social interactions, lifestyles, and human ways of understanding reality. Digital technology, social media, artificial intelligence, and instant communication systems have accelerated the process of rationalization and shaped a culture that prioritizes efficiency, speed, and instant gratification ([F Nugroho, 2019](#); [Heriyanti, 2022](#)). As a result, individuals are confronted not only with a massive flow of information but also with increasing psychological pressure, social alienation, and the weakening of existential awareness. Several studies show that technological modernity often encourages individuals to focus more on material achievement and virtual engagement than on reflective and spiritual dimensions of life ([Berger, 2014](#); [Kalberg, 2013](#)).

The findings of this study indicate that one important way to respond to these conditions is through awareness of human limitations, both physical and rational. This finding is supported by Purwadi, ([2023](#)), who explains that human awareness of mortality, vulnerability, and existential limitations opens space for recognizing transcendent realities beyond empirical and rational capacities. In the midst of technological progress that tends to emphasize rationality and human control, awareness of limitation becomes essential because it reminds individuals that not all dimensions of life can be fully explained through science and technology alone.

Furthermore, this study finds that self-reflection plays a crucial role in helping individuals maintain balance within the technological era. Reflection enables individuals to critically evaluate the influence of digital culture, consumerism, and the rapid flow of technological change on their lives. Rahman et al., ([2023](#)) argue that humans possess limited cognitive capacity, making the ability to critically and selectively process information increasingly important in the digital age. In this context, reflection is not merely a personal activity but also a form of resistance against technological conditions that often encourage distraction, superficiality, and passive consumption of information.

The findings of this research also show that religion continues to play a significant role in helping individuals develop reflective awareness and existential meaning amid technological modernity. Religion not only functions as a system of belief but also provides ethical orientation, spiritual guidance, and critical values that enable individuals to respond more wisely to the pressures of technological society. Unlike Marx's critique that religion merely acts as "opium," the findings of this study suggest that religion in the technological era can also function as a source of critical reflection that helps humans understand their limitations, evaluate the impact of technology on human life, and maintain meaningful relationships with others and with transcendent reality. Therefore, religion remains relevant in contemporary society because it offers not only consolation but also ethical and existential foundations for navigating the challenges created by technological development.

Religion, Technology, and Social Relations in Contemporary Society

The findings of this study indicate that the technological era has significantly transformed social activities and human relations in contemporary society. Technological development not

only changes patterns of communication and economic activity but also influences the way individuals understand meaning, community, and religion itself. Digital technology, social media, and virtual communication systems have created a society characterized by rapid information exchange, individualism, and increasing social complexity ([FJ Nugroho, 2019](#)). In many cases, technology provides efficiency and connectivity, yet at the same time it also produces social uncertainty, alienation, and existential anxiety. Within these conditions, religion continues to play an important role as a source of meaning and moral orientation that helps individuals interpret the realities of modern life.

This study finds that the rapid development of technology often strengthens rational and pragmatic ways of thinking, causing many aspects of life to be measured primarily through efficiency, productivity, and material achievement. However, several scholars argue that not all human experiences can be adequately explained through rationality and technology alone. Thus, religion in the technological era functions not only as a system of belief but also as a framework that helps humans face uncertainty and existential vulnerability.

The findings also show that technological modernity contributes indirectly to ecological crises through patterns of industrialization, consumerism, and exploitative attitudes toward nature. Advanced technology often accelerates environmental exploitation by encouraging excessive production and consumption without sufficient ethical consideration. [A Nurish, \(2025\)](#) argue that ecological destruction is closely related to anthropocentric attitudes that position nature merely as an object for human interests. In response to this condition, religion can function as an ethical foundation that reminds humans of their responsibility toward nature and the interconnectedness between humans, the environment, and transcendent reality. Therefore, religion in the technological era is not merely concerned with personal spirituality but also with ecological ethics and social responsibility.

Furthermore, this study finds that technological development has transformed social relations by creating new forms of interaction that are increasingly virtual and less personal. Social media and digital communication often increase connectivity while simultaneously weakening direct human relationships and social solidarity. [Hamka & Winarni, \(2023\)](#) explain that humans are essentially relational beings who require meaningful relationships with others and with higher values beyond material interests. In the context of technological society, religion can strengthen social solidarity by promoting values such as empathy, compassion, justice, and collective responsibility. Religion therefore functions as a counterbalance to the tendency of technological modernity that often promotes individualism and social fragmentation.

In the economic sphere, the findings of this research indicate that technology has transformed work culture through digital capitalism, competition, and productivity-oriented systems. While technology increases efficiency and economic opportunities, it can also intensify materialism and social inequality. [D Konradus, \(2021\)](#) explains that religion provides ethical principles that encourage humans to understand work not merely as a means of accumulating wealth but as a form of responsibility and contribution to the common good. In this sense, religion becomes important in preventing technological society from reducing human value solely to economic productivity and material success.

Overall, the findings of this study demonstrate that religion remains highly relevant in the technological era because it functions not only as spiritual consolation but also as an ethical and social force that shapes human relations in contemporary society. Although Karl Marx criticized religion as a form of “opium” that could weaken critical consciousness, this study finds that religion can also encourage ethical awareness, ecological responsibility, and social solidarity amid the challenges created by technological modernity. Therefore, religion in the technological era should not be understood merely as an escape from reality, but also as a critical and

transformative force that helps humans navigate complex social, economic, and technological changes.

The Transformation of Religious Understanding through Social Media and Artificial Intelligence

The findings of this study indicate that the technological era, particularly through the development of social media and artificial intelligence (AI), has significantly transformed the way individuals access, understand, and interpret religion in contemporary society. In this research, technology is not limited only to AI-based social media, but broadly refers to digital communication systems, algorithmic platforms, and information technologies that shape patterns of social interaction and knowledge production. However, AI and social media are emphasized because they represent the most dominant forms of technological mediation influencing religious discourse today. Setia, (2024) explain that digital technology has expanded access to religious information while simultaneously decentralizing religious authority. Religious knowledge is no longer obtained exclusively through institutional religious leaders, but increasingly through digital platforms where interpretations are produced and circulated by diverse users.

This study finds that technological development has shifted society from an authority-based model of religious understanding toward an algorithmic and network-based model of knowledge. In traditional religious contexts, truth was generally mediated by religious institutions and doctrinal structures. In contrast, digital technology enables individuals to access multiple interpretations instantly through search engines, social media, video platforms, and AI-generated content. C Papakostas, (2025) argues that algorithmic systems now play a significant role in filtering, recommending, and prioritizing information according to user behavior and platform engagement mechanisms. As a consequence, religious understanding becomes more open and pluralistic, yet also more fragmented and vulnerable to relativism because truth is increasingly shaped by algorithmic visibility rather than institutional or theological authority.

Within the framework of Karl Marx's social criticism, this phenomenon can be connected to Marx's critique of ideology and religion as structures that potentially weaken critical consciousness. Marx argued that religion could function as "opium" because it provided psychological comfort that diverted individuals from critically recognizing oppressive social and economic structures. In the context of the technological era, this study finds that similar mechanisms can also emerge through digital technology, particularly social media and AI-driven systems. The comparison does not mean that religion and technology are identical phenomena, but rather that both can function as systems that shape consciousness and influence how individuals perceive reality. Several studies show that algorithmic social media systems tend to encourage passive consumption, emotional dependence, instant gratification, and continuous distraction, thereby reducing critical reflection and deep engagement with social reality (C Papakostas, 2025).

Therefore, the "opium effect" discussed in this study refers to the way both religion and digital technology may function as mechanisms of consolation and distraction. Religion, according to Marx, could pacify social dissatisfaction through promises of spiritual consolation, while digital technology can pacify individuals through endless flows of entertainment, algorithmic personalization, and instant information consumption. This finding is supported by studies on digital culture that explain how social media platforms are designed to maximize engagement and dependency through algorithmic systems that continuously stimulate emotional and psychological responses (Setia, 2024). In this sense, technology may reproduce forms of dependency similar to what Marx criticized in religion, although through different mechanisms and social contexts.

However, this study also finds that technology does not simply weaken religion or eliminate spiritual life. Instead, digital technology transforms religion into a more dynamic and competitive discursive field. Social media and AI create opportunities for broader religious dialogue, online worship communities, and wider access to spiritual knowledge. At the same time, they also challenge the depth of reflection by encouraging rapid and superficial consumption of religious content. Consequently, religion in the technological era becomes increasingly shaped by interactions between humans, algorithms, digital platforms, and broader social structures.

Overall, the findings of this research demonstrate that technology, especially AI and social media, has transformed not only communication patterns but also the structure of religious authority and human consciousness itself. In relation to Marx's philosophy, the study concludes that the "opium" function in contemporary society can no longer be attributed solely to religion, because digital technology and algorithmic systems may also influence human awareness by shaping patterns of dependence, distraction, and social perception in everyday life.

CONCLUSION

Based on the analysis, it can be concluded that Karl Marx's idea of religion as the "opium of the people" holds significant relevance in understanding the dynamics of human life in the technological era. From Marx's perspective, religion not only serves as a source of comfort for those experiencing suffering, but also has the potential to become an ideological mechanism that obscures social reality and maintains structures of injustice. However, this research demonstrates that reducing religion solely to "opium" is inadequate to explain the complexity of its role in human life. In the contemporary context, the "opium" function criticized by Marx can also be found in technological developments that offer various forms of distraction and escape from reality. This suggests that the primary problem lies not with religion itself, but with the human tendency to seek instant comfort without critically confronting reality. Therefore, a more comprehensive understanding of religion is needed, not only as a belief system but also as a source of values, reflection, and social transformation. Thus, religion retains a strategic position in modern human life, particularly in providing moral orientation and existential meaning amidst the complexity of technological development. The relevance of religion does not lie in its function as an escape, but rather in its ability to encourage critical awareness, social responsibility, and a more humane transformation of life.

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