

## **Marxist Theories of Religion**

### **Karl Marx "On Religion", 1844.**

We can begin our examination of Conflict Theories by looking at the work of Karl Marx for two main reasons:

Firstly, Marx is the starting point for all Marxist analyses of religion (strange, but true...).

Secondly, he provides an alternative theory of religion to (19th century) Functionalist writers such as Comte and Durkheim. In this respect, Marx's basic arguments can be considered as criticisms of Functionalist theories.

The central theme of Marx's analysis of religion is that of ideology. In this respect, common to all sociologists, religion is considered in terms of its status as a belief system (ideological framework) that plays a part in the way in which people see the social world and their position in that world. However, unlike most non-Marxist sociologists, Marx took a very determined stance in relation to the way in which he argued that we should analyse religions. For Marx, religious beliefs represented a significant way in which people were oppressed and exploited within (Capitalist) society. For this reason, Marx saw religion not just as a ideology, but an ideology that was plainly false.

As you should be aware, this committed stance is unusual within sociology, mainly because it makes a solid judgement about the way in which it is considered right and proper to view an aspect of the social world. Religion was not just one set of ideological beliefs amongst many such belief systems. On the contrary, it was seen by Marx to be a dangerous and oppressive belief system that had to be abolished. The following quote illustrates Marx's basic position here:

**"The abolition of religion as the illusory happiness of the people is required for their real happiness. The demand to give-up the illusion about its condition is the demand to give-up a condition which needs illusions."**

**What is Marx saying about the nature of religious belief systems in the above quote?**

In the above, Marx is arguing two things:

1. Firstly, that religious ideologies provide people with a sense of well-being and contentment that is an illusion. Religion may make people feel happy in the short-term, but this is not real contentment. It is, for example, the happiness of the drug-taker who uses drugs to get high for a few hours, during which the cares of the world do not seem to matter - until, of course, the effects of the drug wear off, leaving the drug-user in exactly the same condition as before (an analogy we will develop in a moment).
2. Secondly, that the need for illusions about the world stems from the material conditions under which people live. That is, in a situation where people are oppressed and exploited in the real, material, world, illusory happiness is a substitute for real

happiness. For Marx, therefore, the solution to unhappiness is to remove the cause of the condition rather than to retreat into a pretence that the condition does not exist.

For Marx, the cause of human misery was the Capitalist economic system and the solution was, therefore, its forcible removal and replacement by a non-exploitative economic system, namely Communism. Religion, in this respect, served as a kind of "false consciousness". That is, a form of social control that attempts to prevent people understanding their true social condition and true social self. Thus, Marx argued that before people could be truly happy, they had to throw-off the blinds that stopped them seeing from seeing (and doing something about) their true exploited position. In this respect, the role of intellectuals such as Marx was to explain to the working class the nature of their ideological oppression. Thus:

**"The criticism of religion disillusions man to make him think and act and shape his reality like a man who has been disillusioned and has come to reason, so that he will revolve round himself and therefore round his true sun. Religion is only the illusory sun which revolves round man as long as he does not revolve round himself".**

Marx was not, of course, naive enough to believe that simply by exposing the oppressive role of religion people would come to see their true ideological interests (Communism as he saw it). Religious beliefs, like any form of ideology, do not simply exist as a set of ideas imposed upon the gullible. On the contrary, such beliefs grow out of the conditions under which people experience the social world. Ideologies are, in short, rooted deeply in the conditions under which people live in any society. Marx recognized this when he noted that religion was:

**"...the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, just as it is the spirit of a spiritless situation".**

By this he meant that religious beliefs are a visible symptom of real oppression and exploitation. When people embrace religion they do so, according to Marx, as a means of trying to do something about their material conditions.

As an aside, we can note two points here:

1. Firstly, although Marx saw the gradual disappearance of religion (the secularisation of society) over time (and the advent of a Communist society), for as long as Capitalism persisted religion would persist (since religious beliefs were seen to be ideological supports for Capitalist forms of exploitation).
2. Secondly, Communist societies would have no need for religious beliefs because the material conditions of exploitation, oppression and degradation that give rise to the need for religion would no-longer exist.

Before we start to look in more depth at Marx's conception of religion as ideology, it would be useful to develop one of the themes noted earlier, namely the analogy between religion and drug-taking. Most students are probably familiar with Marx's famous dictum that:

## **"Religion is the opium of the masses"**

Although something of a cliché nowadays, this quote nevertheless encapsulates something of the flavour of Marx's general conception of religion that we can usefully explore.

### **What do you think Marx meant by the phrase "Religion is the opium of the masses"?**

If you need help to understand this idea, start by imagining you have a headache.

You don't know what caused it, but you do know that your head is throbbing and that you need to do something about it. You want relief from an intolerable situation.

To get that relief, you take a pain-killer. After a little while, the pain goes away and you feel much better.

The absence of pain leads you to think that your headache is cured, but this is an illusion, since you haven't cured the headache. All you've done is use a drug to block-out the pain.

In this respect, by taking a drug you've removed the symptom, but you haven't attacked the cause. You still have a headache, but without the pain that accompanies it you believe that your headache has gone.

Given that pain is your body's way of saying that something is wrong with you, taking a drug to cover the pain is clearly a foolish thing to do in the long term (although in the short term it may appear to be the necessary - perhaps only - thing to do).

Thus, once the effects of the drug wear-off, it is possible that the pain will return, which means taking the drug again to relieve the symptoms...

As you should be able to see, Marx used the analogy of drug-taking in relation to religion to make a number of points:

1. Firstly, taking the drug of "religion" to cure the pain of oppression gives the drug-taker temporary relief.
2. Secondly, this relief, although real in the short-term, is an illusory relief in the long-term.
3. To achieve real, lasting, relief, the individual has to attack the cause of their pain (an exploitative economic system) and, by so doing, effect a cure.
4. Once a cure for the pain has been made, the individual will have no need to take the drug of religion, since there will be no painful symptoms of oppression to dull.

