

“Compare the Marxist approach to Religion with the Weberian.”

Karl Marx believed that people’s religious beliefs reflect their alienation. In pre - socialised societies, people are in a alienated relationships with their work, with the products of their work and each other. Religious beliefs therefore arise in a response to, and as a protest against, people’s lack of control of their destiny and their dehumanisation and oppression.

In Marx’s view, religion is the self - consciousness and self - feeling of man who has either not found himself or has already lost himself again. He believes therefore that if the alienation and exploitation associated with social classes is eradicated religion will no longer be needed and cease to exist.

This argument can be developed in a number of ways. First, religion distorts reality by encouraging the belief that people are dependent upon supernatural forces. This means that because events are out of our control there is little people can do apart from trying to influence these powers through prayer or sacrifice. In this way religion obscures the human responsibility for social inequality and thereby discourages the realisation that working for social change may be possible.

Secondly, religion often appears to lend sacred support to the current social order, and in doing so reinforces prohibitions against actions which would challenge those in power. For instance, in medieval Europe, the Church taught that the various unequal “estates of the realm” - monarch, barons and bishops - were God’s creation. This meant that attempts to change the social order would have not been merely an act of treason against the monarch but also a blasphemous rejection of God’s plan, punishable by eternal damnation.

Weber also agrees that religion can often be conservative and helps secure the position of those in power. Weber uses the example of eastern religions such as Hinduism and Buddhism. He concluded that these religions embodied certain key teachings and values which had discouraged the development of Capitalism, while the other western religions such as Christianity and Judaism had facilitated it. Buddhism elsewhere in Asia also worked against this modern outlook. Margaret Mead’s example of 19th Century Burma fits Weber’s argument well. Mead claims that until 1824, the Burmese were cut off from the world, interested in neither trading goods or ideas with the outside world. Their guiding principle was to increase in merit so as to be reincarnated at a higher level. This was achieved through good deeds and going along a known route.

Like Marx, Weber also foresees the decline of religion but in a different way. Weber sees this decline as a result of rationalisation. He claims that the triumph of science and reason has been at the cost of myth, fable and spiritual romanticism seen in medieval Europe. This is part of the process of secularisation. For Weber secularisation was an aspect of the wider process of rationalisation. He considered that the underlying principle behind modernisation is rational, scientific thought - the use of the most effective means to achieve given ends. Applied to technology and to organisation, rational thought has restructured the social world. Equally to the point, applied to the human race’s understanding of itself and its place in the social universe, rational thought has undermined religion and replaced it with various secular and, largely, materialistic explanations of our existence and relationship to nature. Loss of intellectual authority and status has helped and will continue to erode the moral authority of the church.

However, both see this change differently. Marx views the decline of religion as a positive change. He argued that the proletariat will see through the fog of bourgeois ideology and become revolutionary. He goes onto claim that the proletariat’s revolution will be made by the majority. This will enable a classless society to be formed in which the ideals put forward in the French Revolution will be fully realised: freedom will replace oppression; fulfilment alienation; equality inequality; fraternity self - interest. Marx called such a society *communism*.

Weber disagrees with Marx and sees this decline as a negative change. He delivered the famous prophetic warning that the cloak of material prosperity might eventually become an iron cage. It was already becoming an end in itself, and other values were left, in his words: “like the ghost of dead

religious beliefs.” Once capitalism consumed its religious foundations, he feared the consequences.

Unlike Marx, Weber considered that religion could sometimes inhibit social change and sometimes aid change. The main debate between Marx and Weber was the question of whether Protestantism was the primarily the product of capitalism, or did it on the contrary help to produce capitalism? Marx takes the former view, believing that merchants and industrialists of the 16th century and later, were drawn to the Protestant rather than to the Catholic religion because the former satisfied their commercial needs more than the latter. Whereas Catholicism forbade usury, it was acceptable under Protestantism. Whereas Catholic theologians regarded great interest in acquiring wealth as greedy, Protestants, particularly Calvinists looked upon material success as a sign of God’s grace and favour.

Weber disagreed with Marx and instead argued that Calvinism, a particular form of Protestantism, had played a major role in creating a cultural climate in which the capitalistic spirit could thrive. It would be too simple to say that Weber thought that Calvinism “caused” capitalism, but he did consider that there was a certain relationship between Calvinist ideas and the qualities required to be a successful capitalist. Calvinism provided favourable conditions for the development of capitalism. Calvinism preached hard - work and frugality, the Protestant ethic - very useful to virtues to a businessman. An important example by Weber of Calvinism’s contribution to the rise of capitalism, other than its spiritual content, was that of the development of new machine technology which massively increased production potential.

Weber’s main theoretical point is that ideas can change history, and in doing so can contribute to changes in the material context of life. It will be remembered that the whole trend of Marx’s analysis of religious ideas is in the opposite direction. He sees them as primarily as justifying existing social and economic circumstances, and certainly not as providing a major source of historical change. Instead he believes religion was an ideological pall intended to obscure new and different ideas. But Marx did recognise that new ideas could be developed. Human consciousness is able to react thoughtfully and creatively to experience, particularly everyday work experience. Socialism itself had to be “thought of” before it could become a reality. However, for Marx, ideas are formed within, and structured by socio - economic material reality. Socialism can only become possible when society is economically and socially developed to the point where socialist ideas are seen to be realistic.

Weber’s studies of religion are also important from the methodological point of view. As an exercise in comparative sociology; they rank alongside Durkheim’s study of suicide. Weber’s conclusion was that the relationship is one of variety. Religion can help to cause change or impede it; it might be used to support the status quo or against it.