

### **Is religion a force for social change?**

There are two views on the issue of whether religion is a force for social change in society. Certain theories adopt the view that religion is more of a conservative force, maintaining the status quo. Other theories have taken the view that religion is a force for social change, bringing about revolutions in society. With all views, there remains the problem that there is no universal definition of religion. Marx's view for example, would be that religion would inhibit social change as it legitimises and justifies the status quo, where as this is usually contrasted with Weber, who suggests that religion can cause social change, in that it helped the development of capitalism.

The functionalists and early Marxists are the theorists who claim that religion is a conservative force. The functionalists believe religion is a conservative force because they believe religion promotes a stable society, with no disruptions. Early Marxists, on the other hand, believe religion is a conservative force for different reasons, which are mainly that they believe the Bourgeoisie use religion to maintain their position of power in society, therefore keeping things as they are. Marx claimed that religion was an effective agent of social control, referring to religion as the "opiate of the masses", pumping perception-distorting drugs into the proletariat like a hypodermic needle. For him it was a mechanism of social control, it regulates the behaviour of the working class and prevents them from seeing their true situation. It dulled the pain of oppression of the proletariat in several ways. Religion emphasised the existence of an afterlife of eternal bliss - thus giving the oppressed something to look forward to - they felt that their treatment and the injustice against them would not matter when they died and went to heaven, and therefore they did not feel it necessary to rebel or disrupt the existing system as it was not encouraged by religion. Religion made a virtue out of the suffering produced by oppression, a virtue that made their present situation of poverty more tolerable as they knew they would be rewarded in the afterlife. Religion made the present more acceptable as it gave hope of supernatural intervention in the future when the problems on earth would be sorted out by God - the oppressed waited for this to happen instead of rebelling and overturning the system current at that time. The existing social order and hierarchy was justified as religion explained that God decided it. The oppressed accepted this philosophically as they believed there was nothing that they could do about it. Religion made the proletariats unsatisfactory lives bearable as it gave them hope in the future (in the form of an afterlife) and explained to them that there was nothing they could do to change their situations.

Marx also saw religion as creating false class-consciousness, whereby the subject class were blinded to their situation and therefore the interests of the ruling class, powerful and elite, were maintained. Religion was, in essence, another part of the ruling class ideology, i.e. the pervading ideas of the ruling class in society that ensure that the existing social order of capitalism continued. Orthodox Marxists see religion as integrating, stabilizing and regulating people's behaviour. Therefore, says Marx, religion is not a promoter of social change, as it reduces an individual's hostility to wards an unequal and exploitative society. The functionalist, Durkheim, would agree with Marx to a certain extent, that is, he believes that religion "reaffirms the conscience collective", although Durkheim sees this as functional to the needs of society, and therefore a good thing, while Marx sees it as being functional only to the needs of capitalism. Halévy would agree that religion is social change inhibiting, as he claims that during the 18th and 19th centuries, discontented workers were kept

only from action by the appearance of Wesley and Methodism, thus religion prevented a potential revolution. However, criticisms have since been made of this theory, in particular it has been suggested that the rebellion was quelled during this period because the ruling classes knew when to make concessions, rather than there being an underlying religious reason. Durkheim's view of religion as social change inhibiting comes from a belief that religion brings people together, integrating them into society and preventing them from trying to change society in any way. He sees this as a good thing, as he looks only at the harmonious side of religion and disregards any dysfunctions along with all historical evidence of the wars and deaths caused by religion. Glock and Spark, after studies of their own, claimed that religion can be as quick to promote social change as it is to inhibit it, and therefore religion can only be one small factor in the promotion and inhibition of social change. For Durkheim, shared religious belief systems were central to societal consensus as they set rules for social interaction and offered social solidarity and value consensus. In his book, "Elementary Forms of Religious Life", he examined the sources of order and stability in society and highlighted the part that religion played in sustaining this order. Durkheim viewed religion as being a major source of social integration - all religious activity has one main function - the celebration of the community. Religion is not about the worship of god, but of society. People are drawn together through religious activity and this helps to create a value consensus and a common belief system containing the collective morality of that society. Durkheim saw religion as being social cement, binding people together. Durkheim's conclusions are based on his analysis of aboriginal society. Durkheim said that in order to understand religion it is vital to recognize the difference between the sacred (spiritual/religious) and the profane (not religious/secular). He believed that sacred items are assigned their spirituality by society and are an embodiment of the core values which society strives to embrace. Like Comte, the founder of sociology, Durkheim believed that eventually society would secularise and religion would virtually disappear or be replaced by a new religion and other representations of society would take its place, like technology. Technology demonstrates values of enterprise, initiative, materialism, mass commercialism and so forth - things very valuable to society today. Durkheim saw religion as a positive force within society as it has essential and beneficial effects for society. In formulating his theory of religion, Durkheim thought it necessary to find evidence that could be used to support his views. He supported his theory by using secondary research on Aborigines - research that someone else had already carried out. He decided to study the Australian Aboriginal society, as it was simpler to study than complex westernised societies and therefore the effects of religion on that society was more apparent and obvious and therefore was easier to record. All societies, he argued, were primitive at one time and developed societies are, in essence, just more complicated versions of these basic communities and they still have the same basic needs/requirements. Durkheim studied the Aboriginal religion of Totemism whereby certain clans associated themselves with certain objects imbued with sacred powers (birds, animals, plants) and adopted them as their mascots. By worshipping these objects they were celebrating their own society. Religion, Durkheim proposed, performs a number of functions; it provides stability and cohesion within society, it gives people a social identity (for example, Muslim, Christian), it provides a collective conscience - morality, it causes socialisation and allows social control, it teaches key values which regulate peoples behaviour and it gives a meaning and purpose to life.

Weber on the other hand, argues that religion is a radical force in society - a force for change. Weber was a social action theorist and emphasised that meanings (beliefs) and motives direct human behaviour (action). Marx says that it is the economic system that shapes or determines religious belief. Weber concedes that while this might sometimes be the case the reverse could be true, i.e. religious beliefs can influence economic behaviour, therefore producing social change. He sets out this belief in his book, "The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism". The key to understanding his work is the appreciation that his real concern was with the relationship between ideas and society. Like Marx, he believes that ideas are important, however it is not the ideas of the ruling class, but rather the religious ideas of Calvinism and how these effect peoples economic behaviour. According to the Calvinist belief system wealth and the accumulation of money and property was considered an outward manifestation of God's favour and a sign that God had allocated a place in heaven for that person. The Calvinist belief system harboured a belief of pre-ordination within it, suggesting that the 'elect' have already been allocated their places in heaven and people do not have free will to make their own choices as their lives are predestined. This therefore created a great incentive to live sober, hard working and worthy lives, to be sure of their place in heaven - convince and prove to themselves they are part of the 'elect' by becoming wealthy. Calvinism encouraged abstinence from pleasures of life and stipulated that money could not be wasted on personal luxuries and therefore the only channel for it was re-investment. Weber argued that many people in the industrial north of Europe were Calvinists and he concluded from this fact that the Calvinist belief system had had a massive economic impact (was a radical force) on society as it helped capitalism to start off.

Although Neo-Marxism is a form of Marxism, it does not see religion as a conservative force, rather it can be used as an authentic expression and tool of resistance against class based oppression. Maduro says that religion can play a role in the political struggles of oppressed classes in developing countries and looked closely at the ideas of Liberation Theology. The Liberation Theology occurred in Latin America where the vast majority of people were trapped in poverty. The very rich elite ruled many countries. A few people had a great deal of power and were desperate to keep it at all costs, leading to torture, assassinations and the "death squad." In 1968 a conference of Bishops met in Medellin in Colombia, concerned with the general situation in Latin America. The Bishops recognized the temptation to resort to revolutionary violence. They did not believe violence would result in any permanent change. The term "Liberation Theology" became popular. Priests became active in joining movements to fight for injustice and oppression, becoming prepared to speak out. The Liberation Theology supports the idea that religion can be a force of social change and goes against the Marxist idea. Also in criticism of Marx is the fact that some religions are revolutionary like the Levellers and Puritans, also, supporting Liberation Theology, in Nazi Germany many priests spoke out against Hitler, likewise in South Africa Archbishop Desmond Tutu spoke out against apartheid. Also British Church leaders campaigned against inequalities in Capitalism during Thatcher's time as Prime Minister. The Church of England commissioned various reports to show what a poor condition the poor were in.

In conclusion, according to Marxists and other perspectives coming from a structural perspective, religion does not promote, rather keeping society stable and encouraging the social structure. Weber and Nelson see religion as a promoting social change and undermining stability. They believe that religion can act as a catalyst for

social change. However, religion can both encourage and inhibit social change, but it depends on the circumstances and of course the role of religion in society and how influential it is. Many may argue that religion is not as influential in today's society as it once was due to society becoming more secular, therefore is neither a force of social control, nor change.