

"Religion may encourage rather than inhibit social change". Critically discuss this statement with reference to contemporary/modern society

There are many arguments for and against the notion of religion encouraging change in society.

In his book "The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism", Max Weber examines the possible relationship between the rise in Calvinism, a denomination of Protestantism, and the growth of industrialisation (or capitalism). He says that the guidelines laid down by this religion state a man must have a calling in life, or in other words a well-defined career which he pursues in a single-minded, determined manner. Followers of Calvinism were forbidden to spend the money they earned at work on luxuries such as fine clothing, big houses, entertainment and so forth. They believed that God had commanded the individual to work for his glory, which in effect meant that the money was to be re-invested into their businesses. Success in your business was interpreted as meaning you were favourable in God's eyes. Anything which diverted a man from his calling was condemned - time wasting, laziness, idle gossip and more sleep than necessary to name a few. It is these features of the Calvinistic religion that Weber believes contributed to the development of capitalism. He concluded he had successfully demonstrated that religious beliefs could cause social change. However, Marxist writers have dismissed his claims, stating that Calvinism developed in cities where industrialisation had already been well-established, and Protestantism becomes the ideology of capitalists to legitimate their position.

Marxists believe that any change is brought about through the infrastructure, or economic base of society, which they would argue is capitalism. Change in the infrastructure has a knock-on effect and alters the superstructure (which would include religion). From this view, it is impossible to argue that religion can promote social change.

Marx believes that religion is a conservative force. This can mean one of two things - maintaining the status quo, or reverting to traditional values. He states that religion is a conservative force due to it contributing to social order, and brainwashing the subject class into accepting their position in society without argument (a false class-consciousness). If people think their position has been given by God, they are discouraged from attempting to change their situation. Religion therefore diverts attention away from the real source of their oppression and helps to maintain ruling class power. The theories of Bird (1999) and Pryce (1979) fit in with Marx's ideas - Bird suggests that Pentacostalism (a denomination of Christianity), enabled the African-Caribbean people to cope with and adjust to a racist and unjust society. He agreed with Marx's statement that religion serves as an "opium" for the people. Pryce says that it encourages hard work, sexual morality, prudent management of finances and strong support of the family and community. This also reflects the Protestant ethic that Weber says as essential in the development of capitalism.

There is further evidence to support the Marxist view of religion - in Medieval Europe, kings and queens ruled by "divine right", meaning they were answerable only to God and it was therefore sinful for their subjects to resist them. Egyptian Pharaohs were both god and king. Also, in Britain until the 20th Century, worship was

encouraged and expected from the workers as a means of keeping them hardworking and sober.

Functionalist writers would also agree about religion being a conservative force, as it maintains stability and promotes integration and social solidarity. Functionalists believe that religion provides shared norms, values and beliefs, and helps individuals to cope with the stress of everyday life, and as such believe it helps to keep society running smoothly.

Many of society's norms and values originated in religious beliefs. Parsons believes that by establishing general principles and moral beliefs, religion helps to provide the consensus which is necessary for order and stability in society.

However, some would argue that the Functionalist view is too preoccupied with integration and social solidarity, and neglects the many instances where religion is a disruptive force. In many areas of the world today religion is seen as a direct threat to social order, for example the Taliban regime in Afghanistan - there was a change in society as the country reverted to traditional Islamic values (another example of religion as a conservative force). Women, for example, were forbidden to work or learn, and had to instead remain at home, and all forms of media were banned. These laws were rigorously kept to - in cases where people had been found to break a law, they were harshly punished with for example, being beheaded or subject to a public flogging. Another clear argument for religion promoting social change is that which Maduro brings up - some religious leaders have lead revolutionary movements against the ruling classes, such as Archbishop Tutu in South Africa and Father Torres in Columbia, and some preach about how the poor and oppressed should actively fight to improve their situation (known as liberation theology).