

# Revision Notes

**Syllabus Section:** Religion

**Syllabus Area:** Theories of Religion

**Issue:** Marxist Theories of Religion.

Introduction

In this set of Notes we are going to look at a number of alternative theories of religion that derive from the Conflict and Interactionist perspectives in sociology. The first part of this series of Notes is given-over to **Conflict Theories**, while the concluding part will provide a general overview of Interactionist theories.

### **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."**

**1. 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 student's 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.

**2. 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.

Having explained some of the basic ideas put-forward by Marx in his analysis of religion, we can now move-on to explore the theme of religion as a form of ideology in greater depth.

**Understanding Religion As Ideology.**

Marx was concerned to understand religion in terms of a general social theory that involved two major concepts:

1. Ideology
2. Alienation.

In ideological terms, Marx, like Durkheim and numerous other writers, viewed religion as a powerful integrating force in society - it represented a means of creating feelings of togetherness, common bonds, shared values and the like.

Unlike Durkheim however, Marx did not see this ideological aspect of religion in terms of its integration function for society as a whole. On the contrary, because Marx's basic theoretical position involved the idea that (Capitalist) society is composed of various antagonistic / conflicting social classes (defined in terms of their relationship to the means of production in society), he saw religion as one aspect of the social control mechanisms seized upon by the ruling class to enforce their ideological domination of other classes in society.

In this respect, religion was not just an integrating ideology that explained the social world (and people's location within that world), it also served the purpose of justifying the unequal distribution of rewards in that world. Religion in Victorian Britain, for example, could therefore be used to do such things as:

Uphold the status quo in society.

For example, the social world could legitimately be portrayed as "god-given" and consequently beyond the power of mortal man to change.

Legitimise economic exploitation

For example, by arguing that since God had made the world in His image, it was clear that He had a plan for the world and the people in it. It was not the place of people to question this scheme of things.

Justify poverty and inequality.

For example, poverty could be portrayed as a virtue; something that had to be endured in an uncomplaining fashion, since it was a means of achieving true spiritual riches in the afterlife (heaven).

At the same time, however, the power of religion as an ideology was reflected in its ability to do something for those "who were believers", insofar as it could "dull the pain of oppression" with its (false) promises of eternal life (Christianity), reincarnation into a higher social caste (Hinduism) and so forth.

According to Marx, there are four main ways in which religion "dulls the pain of oppression":

1. It promises a paradise of eternal bliss in "life after death".

2. Many religions make a virtue out of the suffering produced by oppression.
3. Religion can offer the hope of supernatural intervention to solve problems on earth.
4. Religion justifies the social order (maintains the "status quo").

**3. For each of the above, can you provide specific examples of the way in which religion is held to "dull the pain of oppression"?**

**For example: 1. By promising salvation in the after-life, people are encouraged to accept their lot on earth.**

In the above respect, religious belief, for Marx, was indicative of the social problems faced by people in their everyday lives. Thus:

**"Religious distress is...the expression of real distress and the protest against real distress."**

**4. If religion represents an illusory or false happiness, what does this tell us about the way in which Marxists view the true nature of social reality?**

Marx's views on religion tell us something about the way in which Marxists generally view the nature of social reality.

For example, for Marx to argue that religion is an illusory happiness, it must follow he had a conception of real (non-illusory) happiness. In simple terms, if we are to argue that something is false, it follows that in order to do this we must claim to know what is true.

This tells us something about the way in which Marxists seek to understand the nature of social reality. In this respect, their argument is that the social world has a basic, fundamental, real, basis; the nature of this reality is continually mystified (by ideologies such as religion). The reason for this is that this reality excludes the bourgeoisie and this, clearly, is unpalatable to this class - hence their attempts to misrepresent the nature of social reality in their favour.

Methodologically, therefore, the task of Marxism is basically one of trying to unmask the ideological distortions created by powerful classes in society as they seek to justify and impose their privileged position on other classes in society. This idea is developed in more detail in the Study Pack "Perspectives and Methodologies".

In order to understand how a ruling class (the bourgeoisie) attempts to distort and mystify social reality in favour of this class we can note the following ideas:

1. The structure of (Capitalist) societies is fundamentally unequal - different social classes can be defined in relation to their differential relationship to the means of production.

The Ruling Class (those who own the means of production) are the most powerful class in society by virtue of the fact that their economic ownership confers both political and ideological power.

2. The emergence of religious beliefs is not something "dreamt-up" by a ruling class to justify their power and domination. On the contrary, religious beliefs arise out of the material conditions of people's existence - the "oppressed" seek in religion what they are denied in this world (usually some form of status, sense of belonging, feeling of control over their lives, comfort and so forth).

What Marx does claim, however, is that since religion is an ideological framework (and a very powerful one at that), it can be seized upon by powerful social classes and used to justify their economic and political domination.

3. Although the powerful are able - in many instances - to control and channel religious beliefs as a source of justification for their continued exploitation of other classes, we should not overlook the fact that religion is a powerful force in its own right. It may not, in some circumstances, be possible to control and contain religious fervour - in which case, religion potentially becomes a powerful force for social change.

For Marx, however, any form of social change that did not attack and subvert the basic cause of social inequality in Capitalist society (unequal ownership of the means of economic production) was simply doomed to reproduce the inequalities that existed prior to, for example, a religious revolution.

The example of Iran in the 1980's is a case in point. From a Marxist perspective, although social change clearly occurred (in the sense that a secular dictator, the Shah of Persia, was overthrown), the outcome of this "religious revolution" was simply a "change at the top" - the country is now governed by a religious dictatorship that has done little or nothing to change the material conditions under which the majority of the population live. Thus, such change as occurred was reactionary (that is, looking back to a supposedly better way of organizing society), rather than revolutionary.

One criticism we could make here is that if religion is related to exploitation and oppression in Capitalist society, the members of a ruling class should not be very religious, since they would, for example, have no need to "dull the pain of oppression". In addition, if religion is a mystifying process (a form of propaganda that seeks to hide the reality of exploitation and oppression in Capitalist society from the working class), it seems ridiculous to suppose that the bourgeoisie would believe their own propaganda.



There are, of course, many ways that we could square the above circle (for example, by arguing that the ruling class are religious because they can they directly control the behaviour of the working class through their domination of religious institutions). However, these types of explanation tend to rest on a conspiratorial approach to the understanding of social behaviour (the rather unlikely idea that thousands of members of the bourgeoisie are somehow in "secret agreement") and Marx avoided these individualistic types of explanation.

Marx was aware that the fact that the ruling class in Victorian Britain were actually very religious (in terms of practice - attending Church and so forth) and to explain this apparent contradiction he used the concept of alienation. This is a concept that we now need to explore in more detail.

The concept of alienation is useful, in the above respect, because it helps to explain the attraction of religious beliefs across the class structure in a way that does not rely upon vague and rather unbelievable conspiracies. What we need to do next, therefore, is to outline Marx's ideas concerning this very important concept and then relate it to the concept of religion

### **Alienation.**

For Marx, the single most important activity in any society was work; that is, the way in which a society was organized to solve the problems associated with physical survival (the production of food, clothing, shelter and so forth). In order to perform this necessary task, people had to co-operate; that is, they had to engage in an explicitly social activity that involved people working together to produce things (commodities).

Work was not just a means of producing commodities that people needed for their day-to-day existence, however. For Marx, an added dimension to work was the idea that people gained satisfaction not just from the act of producing goods but also, more importantly, from the fact that by working people were helping to support each other. That is, they were acting in ways that affirmed the social bonds between them as human beings. When I, for example, produce something that is of use to you, two things are apparent:

1. I have done something that is useful for you (I am helping you to survive and, by extension, I am demonstrating that I value your continued existence).
2. By helping you it also makes me feel good about myself. I have done something worthwhile.

Thus, the production of commodities on a co-operative basis has two major consequences, in that it binds people together (makes us see the things we have in common, thereby giving us a sense of belonging to a society) in two main ways:

1. On the basis of mutual economic need (we need to co-operate to physically survive)
2. On the basis of mutual political need (by co-operating in this way we get satisfaction from knowing that the work we do benefits others).

For Marx, therefore, the economic system (economic base or infrastructure of a society) and the political system (the superstructure of a society) are seen to be, ideally, mutually related and dependent. The economic system produces political relationships and these relationships are expressed in terms of values and norms of behaviour (that is, they constitute the culture of a society).

The perfect expression of this relationship is to be found under a Communistic mode of economic production, where people produce things for each others benefit and, by so doing, benefit themselves (society as a whole).

Under non-communistic systems of economic production (Capitalism, for example), Marx argued that the relationship between economics and politics is radically different. Under Capitalist modes of production, for example, economic relationships are very different because Capitalism introduces a distorting element into the equation, namely the concepts of private property and profit.

When people co-operate to produce things in Capitalist society they do not own these things. On the contrary, they are paid a wage for their labour and the things they produce are owned (privately) by their employer. The employer not only owns these commodities, they also profit from the ability to put people to work by only paying their employees a fraction of the overall value of the commodities produced (that is, they pay people to produce things and then sell these things in the market place for as much as they can). Anything they can get over and above the cost of producing a commodity is then kept as profit.

Marx argued that the main consequences of this separation between the economic sphere and the political sphere are as follows:

1. It breaks the bond between producers and consumers. People no-longer produce things for the benefits they bring to themselves and others. Rather, a specific group (or social class) reap the major benefit from the production process.
2. By breaking this (natural) relationship between the economic and political spheres, a severe social problem is created, in that the main mechanism for the integration of individuals into society is destroyed.

People still have to feel that they belong to a society (that they have things in common with others and so forth) and so the destruction of this natural linkage means that so other way of creating a sense of belonging has to be found.

It's important that you do not see this as some kind of "class conspiracy". Rather, you should think of it in terms of structural imperatives. Thus:

- a. People need to feel that they have things in common with others - that they belong to a society which is bound together in some way.
- b. The things that bind people together in Communistic forms of society are destroyed under Capitalist systems.
- c. Since the need still exists, other ways of binding people together arise to fill the cultural vacuum created by the gradual destruction of the former mutual bonds.

Under Capitalism, therefore, the kinds of institutions that arise to fulfil the function that has been destroyed are cultural ones, such as religion. In this respect, religious practices and beliefs provide the sense of belonging, commitment and sense of self-worth that are no-longer created through work.

In this, we can see three further ideas:

1. Like various Functionalist writers (for example, Durkheim) Marx saw the need for integrating social mechanisms. That is, some way in which individuals could create a sense of society.
2. Unlike Functionalist writers, Marx saw the separation of the spheres (economic, political, cultural and so forth - what Functionalist writers call the social sub-systems - Economic, Political, Kinship and Cultural - as a symptom of a wider problem (which, as we will see in a moment, he termed alienation).
3. Whereas Functionalists see cultural institutions such as religion as necessary for the functioning of society, Marx argued they are only necessary institutions under an economic system that fails to provide these integrating mechanisms as part of the reason for its existence.

Marx referred to the existence of religion in society as evidence of alienation and we can briefly explain this idea in the following way.

When people co-operate to produce economic goods in Communistic terms they also, as we have seen, create a sense of belonging to each other - a form of mutual dependence that represents a sense of fulfilment. In this respect, they learn to value both themselves, as human beings doing socially-responsible and valuable tasks, and their fellow human beings are doing similarly socially-responsible and valuable tasks.

However, once this linkage is broken, people are encouraged to act in self-interested ways. They work for wages to support themselves and their family and, by so doing, are exploited through their work. Wage-labourers no-longer have any sense of control over the things they create and, therefore, lose the sense of creating commodities that have a social benefit. In short, people become socialized into putting their interests above the interests of others.

When this happens, Marx argued that people start to become alienated from:

- a. The things they produce (because they no-longer own these things) and
- b. Their fellow human beings (because on the one hand they are encouraged to act in a self-interested way and, on the other, they are exploited through their work).

Thus, alienation is not, according to Marx, a simple psychological condition (people do not feel alienated; rather they are alienated, which a very different thing). When people are alienated from each other they may feel psychologically depressed, unhappy and so forth, but these are symptoms of the problem, not its cause.

Furthermore, if people are alienated from each other, they cease to see each other as human beings, as such, but rather as commodities - things to be bought and sold,

created and destroyed and so forth. This is because, under Capitalism, the employee is treated as a commodity, not as a human being. When the employee is at work, he or she has the same status as a machine or a bundle of raw materials - a thing to be bought and sold, pushed around and so forth.

However, because people are thinking commodities, they still need to experience feelings of belonging and so forth, hence the relationship between alienation (a sense of loss) and, for example, religion (a cultural form that promises to replace that sense of loss). In this we can see why Marx looked upon religion with a sense of scorn, since it merely represents a symptom of exploitation; people create a false sense of belonging, through religion, to replace the sense of belonging lost under Capitalist economic systems.

Thus, under a Capitalist form of economic system, Marx argued that all classes in society are alienated in one way or another and all classes, therefore, seek to relieve this sense of alienation by adopting various cultural forms of interaction (and, in particular, religious forms). Thus:

a. The proletariat is alienated from the product of its labour (commodities), its social self (society as a whole) and its individual self (the self-worth that is created through producing goods that benefit others). The primary reason for this is because it is exploited by the ruling class (the bourgeoisie) in Capitalist society. The proletariat experiences alienation and comes to terms with it (partly) through religious beliefs.

b. The bourgeoisie, because of the fact that they are exploiting their fellow human beings for private gain, also experience alienation (from "society" and their fellow human beings) and religious beliefs are used by this class as a substitute for communal, socially-beneficial, interaction.

In this respect, the middle and upper classes are just as likely to adopt various forms of religious belief, behaviour and organization as the working class. The difference, using the concept of alienation, is that they do so for quite different reasons...

**5. Try to identify some Christian beliefs that could be used by the powerful to justify and uphold the status quo in our society:**

The Hindu religion is a good example of the way in which powerful religious beliefs can be used to justify social inequality. Using a text-book, find a section that discusses the Caste system of social stratification.

**6. Make brief notes about the way in which religious beliefs may represent a form of social control through ideology.**

To sum-up this brief review of Marx's analysis of religion, a number of points can be noted:

1. Marx places great stress on the "illusory" nature of religious belief. In this respect, he argues that religion is a form of ideology that serves to distract the proletariat, for example, from the real causes of their misery and oppression (economic inequality). One problem, in this respect, is that not all religions groups concentrate upon "rationalizing the here and now" - many such groups emphasize the liberating aspect of religious ideas as a means of attacking oppression in this life. We will look at this idea in more detail in a moment.

2. Although both Marx and Durkheim saw the integrating power of religion, they differed in relation to the idea that:

Durkheim saw this as necessary and desirable  
Marx saw this as repressive.

3. Although religion, according to Marx, plays a repressive role in society, it is by no-means clear how effective this is in modern, industrialized, societies. Various writers, such as Turner ("Religion and Social Theory", 1983), have argued that, historically, the working-classes have not demonstrated a great deal of overt religious conviction (measured in terms of Church attendance, involvement in sects and so forth).

In pre-industrial societies it would appear that the central role of religion in people's lives does play an overtly repressive role, but the case for modern societies is rather more open to doubt.

4. Marx has argued that religious beliefs (as ideology) are seized-upon and adapted by powerful social classes as a means of exerting their hegemony ("leadership") over other social classes. Thus, for example, Marx's view of the role played by religion in the development of Capitalism is very different - as we shall see - to that of Max Weber ("The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism", 1904).

Whereas Marx, in common with Functionalists such as Durkheim, saw religion as a conservative social force (concerned with the upholding of the status quo in society, for example), writers such as Weber have argued that religion can be a force for large-scale social change. We will explore these ideas in more detail in the "Religion and Social Change" Study Pack.

In this next section we need to look at a number of revisions and criticisms of Marx's ideas on religion. In terms of developing Marx's basic ideas, it is important that we recognize that these ideas have been subjected to a number of revisions by Marxists (just as, in another context, Durkheim's basic ideas have been subjected to revisions by Functionalists writing after his death). In addition, the previous Study Pack looked at a perspective (Functionalism) that viewed religion in rather different terms and we be looking at a third perspective (Interactionism) that is also critical of Marxist perspectives.

**Modern Marxism and Religion.**

Marxism, as a sociological perspective, has constantly evolved since Marx's death and we can deal briefly here with some 20th century Marxist interpretations of the role of religion in Capitalist societies.

Writing in Italy in the 1930's, Antonio Gramsci used the concept of hegemony to argue that cultural institutions, such as religion, become woven into the fabric of people's perception of the social world. Like Marx, therefore, Gramsci argued that religious beliefs represent a way of thinking about the social world that can be exploited by powerful social groups to their own ends.

Religion is more than just a "dominant form of ideology" in Capitalist society since, as we have already seen:

- a. It arises out of people's attempt to replace feelings of belonging and shared interests that are lost in non-communistic modes of economic production.
- b. Religion is an ideology that is shared amongst various social classes. It is for this very reason that it is such a potentially powerful ideology. As Marx noted, religion clearly benefits people in alienated society, but the ruling class benefit the most because one of the "unintended consequences" of religious belief is, according to Marxists, the maintenance of the status quo in society.

One of the main problems for Marxists in their analysis of the role of religion is the idea that religions should, of necessity, always be supportive of the status quo in society (for reasons we've already discussed). However, it is evident from examples around the world (the most obvious, perhaps, being the development of "Liberation Theology" in South America - a form of Catholicism in which priests have argued that the Church should represent the legitimate grievances of the poor, rather than help ruling dictatorships to consolidate their oppression of their populations), that religion is a social force that is capable of being used to liberate people from oppression.

In recent years, Neo-Marxists such as Poulantzas have developed Gramsci's "Humanistic Marxism" using the concept of relative autonomy to explain how religion can act in this way. For Poulantzas, individuals within an institution may, at certain times, be able to interpret their role in ways that appear to challenge the dominant ideology of an institution (such as Catholicism). This is especially true of the higher-placed individuals in an institution (managers, bishops and so forth), where their position in a power structure gives them the "relative freedom" to act in various ways.

This freedom is relative, however, because it has its limits. In the case of Liberation Theology, for example, the Catholic Church hierarchy has not welcomed this ideological form and has tried, with varying degrees of success, to limit its impact.

Finally, in this section we can look at the ideas put forward by **Bryan Turner** ("Religion and Social Theory", 1983) which adopts a rather more critical tone in relation to the empirical evidence available to test the idea that the universal role of religion is that of an integrating social force. In this respect, Turner looks at the idea of a "dominant ideology" in society and argues that instead of seeing religion as part of the way in which a ruling class somehow fools the working class, through cultural institutions such as religion, into a whole-hearted acceptance of Capitalism, we should see the ideological impact of religion in a more-subtle way.

For Turner, the argument is that a ruling class is the dominant class because it has the power to exploit all other classes - if these classes accept their exploitation, so much the better (it makes it easier to exploit them). However, even if they don't accept their exploitation, repressive state apparatuses such as the police, the army and so forth are all in place to ensure that any form of rebellion is unlikely to be successful...

In this respect, the basic argument is that religious behaviour and organization should be understood more in terms of its significance for the social cohesion of a Capitalist dominant class than in terms of its implicit ideological role as a form of social control.

In "Religion and Social Theory", Turner argues that, in feudal Britain for example, religious beliefs served to unify the ruling class, rather than to justify, ideologically, the peasantry's own oppression. In this view, the peasantry were seen as being largely indifferent to the views of the Church, for example - mainly because their lives were focused almost exclusively upon the need to stay alive...

Similarly, although the growth of Methodism in 19th century Britain is usually seen as involving, predominantly, the working classes, the historical evidence suggests that it was mainly lower middle-class in origin and practice - the working classes had to be induced and threatened into taking any sort of religious organization seriously.

Methodism began as a sect and gradually evolved into a denomination. Thinking back to Yinger's typology:

### **7. What type of sect was Methodism?**

### **8. In what ways can we use Yinger's typology to "double check" the idea that Methodism was largely middle-class in origin and practice?**

For Turner, therefore, the significance of religion lay in its ability to provide a set of universal, moral guide-lines for ruling class behaviour - especially in relation to marriage and the inheritance of property (something that was very important in the 17th - 19th centuries as Capitalism developed and the bourgeoisie emerged to challenge the feudal aristocracy both economically and then politically. The main argument, in this respect, is that:

1. The emerging bourgeois class had to have a means of ensuring that property rights could be transmitted from one generation to the next.
2. In this respect, sexual behaviour had to be controlled in some way, to ensure that legitimate heirs could be identified for inheritance purposes.
3. Religion provided a clear moral framework for this pattern of behaviour, in that it:
  - Involved a legal contract of marriage
  - Controlled legitimate sexual behaviour
  - Ensured the creation of a coherent family / kinship network for the transmission of property rights.

In this respect, the significance of religion lies in its ability to provide a legitimating system of social controls for the bourgeoisie (the lower classes had no real need for such a system since they had no property to pass-on to their heirs).

For Turner, therefore, religious organization was seen as being significant at a particular phase in Capitalist development, primarily because it provided an ideological framework for the justification of patriarchy and primogeniture (inheritance down the male line). In modern societies, where this form of inheritance has declined in importance (legal controls relating to property rights are, for example, far more significant), religious activity has consequently declined as a feature of upper class social organization.

Marxism is one form of Conflict perspective in sociology and in order to look at an alternative Conflict / Interactionist perspective we can turn towards an examination of the work of Max Weber before concluding this series of Study packs with an overview of mainstream Interactionist perspectives.



Having worked through these Notes - and before you move to the next - you need to feel confident you have understood (and, when required, can demonstrate an understanding of) the following:

1. Marx viewed religion as a conservative social force - one that served to uphold and legitimate the status quo.
2. Religious belief and activity cannot, according to the Marxist view, be divorced from a consideration of the economic conditions that prevail in Capitalist society.
3. Religion is an "alienating social force" since it prevents people understanding their true ("real") social conditions and (class) interests.
4. Religion is not a "ruling class conspiracy"; the oppressed in society seek in religion that which they are denied in Capitalist society.
5. Marx saw the integrating function of religion as oppressive rather than "functionally necessary".
6. For Turner, the role of religion was one of helping a ruling class to maintain its cohesiveness as a class, rather as a means of legitimating economic oppression.
7. The significance of religion for Capitalism, according to Turner, was its ability to provide a set of universal, moral, guide-lines for ruling class behaviour.
8. Max Weber adopted an exclusive definition of religion which he applied to the study of traditional societies (where religion is the dominant belief system) and modern societies (where science is the dominant belief system).
9. For Weber, the process of modernization involves a change from a pre-modern (traditional) type of society to a modern (industrial) type of society. As change occurs, the fragmentation of belief systems, roles and institutions also occurs.
10. Rationalization involves a change in the way people think about the natural and social worlds. Scientific rationalism involves thinking about how things can be organized and performed more efficiently.
11. For Weber, scientific ideologies are not the sole cause of the relative decline in religious ideologies. The twin process of modernization and rationalization make monolithic religious ideologies less plausible.
12. For Berger, religion represents an ideological interpretation and understanding of the social world - a "cosmology".
13. The effectiveness of religion is explained in terms of its "plausibility" (something that applies to all forms of ideology). It must explain something about the world and do so in a way that fits-in with people's levels of understanding.
14. Berger and Luckmann use an inclusive definition of religion - any ideological framework ("system of meaning whereby people come to understand the nature of their social world") that provides an all-embracing framework for human action and understanding is to be considered a religion.