

# Functionalism and conflict theory essay sample

[Religion](#)



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Emile Durkheim, the founder of functionalism, spent much of his academic career studying religions, especially those of small societies. The totemism, or primitive kinship system of Australian aborigines as an “elementary” form of religion, primarily interested him. This research formed the basis of Durkheim’s 1921 book, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, which is certainly the best-known study on the sociology of religion. Durkheim viewed religion within the context of the entire society and acknowledged its place in influencing the thinking and behavior of the members of society.

Durkheim found that people tend to separate religious symbols, objects, and rituals, which are sacred, from the daily symbols, objects, and routines of existence referred to as the profane. Sacred objects are often believed to have divine properties that separate them from profane objects. Even in more-advanced cultures, people still view sacred objects with a sense of reverence and awe, even if they do not believe that the objects have some special power.

Durkheim also argued that religion never concerns only belief, but also encompasses regular rituals and ceremonies on the part of a group of believers, who then develop and strengthen a sense of group solidarity. Rituals are necessary to bind together the members of a religious group, and they allow individuals to escape from the mundane aspects of daily life into higher realms of experience. Sacred rituals and ceremonies are especially important for marking occasions such as births, marriages, times of crisis, and deaths. Durkheim’s theory of religion exemplifies how functionalists examine sociological phenomena. According to Durkheim, people see religion as contributing to the health and continuation of society in general.

Thus, religion functions to bind society's members by prompting them to affirm their common values and beliefs on a regular basis. Durkheim predicted that religion's influence would decrease as society modernizes. He believed that scientific thinking would likely replace religious thinking, with people giving only minimal attention to rituals and ceremonies. He also considered the concept of " God" to be on the verge of extinction. Instead, he envisioned society as promoting civil religion, in which, for example, civic celebrations, parades, and patriotism take the place of church services. If traditional religion were to continue, however, he believed it would do so only as a means to preserve social cohesion and order.

#### Weber and social change

Durkheim claimed that his theory applied to religion in general, yet he based his conclusions on a limited set of examples. Max Weber, on the other hand, initiated a large-scale study of religions around the globe. His principal interest was in large, global religions with millions of believers. He conducted in-depth studies of Ancient Judaism, Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Taoism. In *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1904/1958), Weber examined the impact of Christianity on Western thinking and culture. The fundamental purpose of Weber's research was to discover religion's impact on social change. For example, in Protestantism, especially the " Protestant Work Ethic," Weber saw the roots of capitalism.

In the Eastern religions, Weber saw barriers to capitalism. For example, Hinduism stresses attaining higher levels of spirituality by escaping from the toils of the mundane physical world. Such a perspective does not easily lend itself to making and spending money. To Weber, Christianity was a salvation

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religion that claims people can be “ saved” when they convert to certain beliefs and moral codes. In Christianity, the idea of “ sin” and its atonement by God’s grace plays a fundamental role. Unlike the Eastern religions’ passive approach, salvation religions like Christianity are active, demanding continuous struggles against sin and the negative aspects of society.

#### Marx: Conflict theory

Despite his influence on the topic, Karl Marx was not religious and never made a detailed study of religion. Marx’s views on the sociology of religion came from 19th century philosophical and theological authors such as Ludwig Feuerbach, who wrote *The Essence of Christianity* (1841). Feuerbach maintained that people do not understand society, so they project their own culturally based norms and values onto separate entities such as gods, spirits, angels, and demons. According to Feuerbach, after humans realize that they have projected their own values onto religion, they can achieve these values in this world rather than in an afterlife. Marx once declared that religion is the “ opium of the people.”

He viewed religion as teaching people to accept their current lot in life, no matter how bad, while postponing rewards and happiness to some afterlife. Religion, then, prohibits social change by teaching nonresistance to oppression, diverting people’s attention away from worldly injustices, justifying inequalities of power and wealth for the privileged, and emphasizing rewards yet to come. Although people commonly assume that Marx saw no place for religion, this assumption is not entirely true. Marx held that religion served as a sanctuary from the harshness of everyday life and

oppression by the powerful. Still, he predicted that traditional religion would one day pass away.

### Marxist Theory of Religion

The social-conflict approach is rooted in Karl Marx's critique of capitalism. According to Marx, in a capitalist society, religion plays a critical role in maintaining an unequal status quo, in which certain groups of people have radically more resources and power than other groups of people. Marx argued that the bourgeoisie used religion as a tool to keep the less powerful proletariat pacified. Marx argued that religion was able to do this by promising rewards in the after-life, instead of in this life. It was in this sense that Marx asserted the following. " Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the feeling of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless circumstances. It is the opium of the people...The abolition of religion as the illusory happiness of the people is the demand for their real happiness" (p. 72). In this passage, Marx is calling for the proletariat to discard religion and its deceit about other-worldly events.

Only then would this class of people be able to rise up against the bourgeoisie and gain control of the means of production, and only then would they achieve real rewards, in this life. Thus, the social-conflict approach to religion highlights how religion, as a phenomenon of human behavior, functions to maintain social inequality by providing a worldview that justifies oppression. It should be reiterated here that Marx's approach to sociology was critical in the sense that it advocated for change in the world. This is in stark contrast to other scholars, many of whom pursue knowledge for knowledge's sake, and lack overt political aims. Because Marx was

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committed to criticizing the prevailing organization of society during his time, he took a particularly aggressive stance towards religion.

He believed that it was a tool of social control used to maintain an unequal status quo, and that it should be abolished. 🎬 The social-conflict approach to religion highlights how religion, as a phenomenon of human behavior, maintains social inequality by advancing a worldview that justifies oppression. 🎬 Karl Marx's critical approach demanded that action be taken to resolve social inequalities. This was in stark contrast to his scholarly peers, many of whom pursued scholarship for the sake of knowledge, and did not attach to these academic projects overt political goals. 🎬 Karl Marx viewed religion as a social control used to maintain the status quo in a given society.

### Conflict Theory

Conflict theory is a part of the social sciences and seeks to analyze the political, economic and social inequalities within cultures. Conflict theory is associated with Marxism, but has been used within social science theories such as functionalism and positivism. Religion

One aspect of culture is expressed in the varying institutions of religion, which are a natural outgrowth of human behaviors and social groups.

Religion is largely an attempt to add structure and understanding to the universe, and as such will seek to explain the noticeable inequalities that exist in human culture. Religion perpetuates conflict

Because of religion's role of providing explanations for the state of the world, religion tends to offer explanations for social inequalities and often will

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perpetuate them by giving them divine sanction. Religion acts as a justifications of the inequalities and thus lays a foundation for social conflict that is only accidentally based upon religious identification. Religious conflict mimics social conflicts

The natural cultural conflicts that emerge in culture are played out within different religious communities. Because social groups tend to be of the same religious tradition, group identifications will tend to overlap with religious identification. Thus the conflicts between religious groups are often based upon conflicts between the groups themselves for other social, political and economic reasons. This is true especially where one religion is dominant over others. A group's religious identification will thus act as an indicator of social status. A minority religious group, whether part of the same larger religious tradition as the majority or not, will experience the social stigma in the same way as any other minority group, while incorporating the minority social status into its theology and religious worldview. Comparatively, the dominant group enjoys its social position while often absorbing the role of affluence into its theology and religious worldview. Religion magnifies social inequalities

The theological differences between religious groups will magnify the preexisting social, political and economic differences by incorporating those inequalities into the group's religious identification and theology over time. The more a group identifies with its social status, the more the group will incorporate this status into its worldview and thus its views about the supernatural and its religious beliefs. By associating their social status with their theology and religious worldview, the inequalities become magnified

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and even absorbed into the group identity. Thus a groups' social status will become reflected by the groups' religious ideologies