

Religion can be both a conservative force essay



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This essay title addresses a major debate in sociology between the different schools of thought. Marxists, Functionalists and Feminists all believe religion is a conservative force, but for different reasons. Whereas, other schools of thought believe that religion can serve different purposes at different time, in some cases it can be a conservative force and at other times, it can be an initiator of change. The main debate is between Marx and Weber. A traditional Marxist view- advocated by Karl Marx- views religion as a conservative force, a force that discourages social change.

They believe that religion is part of the ruling class apparatus which legitimises their position. An example of this is the monarchs in medieval Europe ruled by divine right- their position is God-given, which discourages attempts to change the situation. Marx states that religion is ' the opium of the people'- it provides consolation for the misery of their oppression by offering the false promise of eternal happiness in the next life. This illusion of happiness makes life appear bearable and therefore discourages attempts by the subject class to change their situation.

In this respect, religion serves as a conservative force. Alternative Marxists, such as Engels, recognised that some religious movements demand change for example; he saw aspects of communism in early Christianity. However, because of religion's emphasis on the supernatural, Engels felt these movements were doomed to failure- they would not lead to political revolution. Other Marxists such as, Gramsci and Maduro claim that at certain times and places, religion can directly support the liberation of the subject class and help them to become aware of their true situation.

Feminists also view religion as a conservative force, they see as maintaining patriarchy- the domination of women by men. They see Christianity as providing evidence of this. For example; the Christian God has traditionally been seen as male, Eve was created second to Adam and was therefore inferior and up until recently women could not become clergy in Christian Churches. All these examples serve to keep women in their traditional place- subordinate to men. However, there are an array of examples which suggest that these feminists are wrong, for example; goddesses played a significant part in ancient Greek and Roman religion.

Feminists and Marxists see religion as a conservative force but they see this lack of change as a negative thing. Whereas, Functionalists think that religion as a conservative force is a good thing- functionalists believe that everything in society performs a function, and that the function of religion is to; reinforce value consensus, strengthen social solidarity and deal with life crises that threaten to disrupt society. Durkheim believes that religion reinforces the collective consciousness- the norms and values of society.

He says that religious rituals strengthen social solidarity by binding together members of society. Another Functionalist, Malinowski, claims that religion serves to reduce the anxiety and tension which result from events which threaten to disrupt social life. For example at a life crises such as death, a funeral ceremony brings people together and consols the loved ones by promising life after death. In doing so it reintegrates society. According to Talcott Parsons, religion reinforces value consensus. An example of this is the Christian Ten Commandments back up the norms and values of Western societies.

Parsons also believes that religion gives meaning to life and makes sense of it. It helps people to accept their situation and not to question why some people do better than others. Religion promises that if they suffer in this life, then they will be rewarded in the next. Some have criticised Functionalists views on religion, claiming that they fail to address instances of religion as a force for social change. Max Weber presents an argument against Marx's view that religion is largely shaped by economic factors.

Weber argues that in certain cases religion can help to shape entire economic systems and bring radical changes to society as a whole- the complete opposite! In his book, 'The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism', he claims that a number of Protestant religions which developed in 16th century Europe produced the ideas which were essential for the development of capitalism. For example these religions promoted values such as; hard work, self-discipline and a condemnation of time-wasting and laziness.

If Weber is correct, then religion can sometimes be a significant force for social change. However, a number of researchers claim that Weber was wrong and that capitalism came first and helped to produce Protestantism. In recent years, there has been a rise in religious fundamentalism.

Fundamentalists usually follow a literal interpretation of religious texts and strict moral codes of behaviour. Some researchers see fundamentalism as a particularly conservative form of religion- it looks backward, it rejects many of the changes in modern society, it tries to return to a former time.

However some say that rather than maintaining things the way they are, fundamentalists aim to make things the way they were. In one respect they are conservative, in another respect they are not because they seek to change the existing society. Christian fundamentalism in the USA has flourished over the last 30 years and there is evidence that it had a significant influence on the election of George Bush in 2000.

Fundamentalism is also prominent in the East- in Iran. Islamic fundamentalists see themselves as the saviours and moral guardians of their societies.

They are the chosen few who must restore true religion in an immoral and decadent society which has abandoned God's design for living. They have a duty to translate God's will into practice in line with a literal reading of the Qur'an. In the 1920s and 30s, the Shah- the ruler of Iran- westernised the country, and this angered fundamentalists. In 1979, the people overthrew the Shah and an Islamic state was established. Although the aim of religious fundamentalists is a return to the past, they also aim to change existing society.

Christian fundamentalism in the USA aims to change the moral landscape of America. Fundamentalism in Iran aimed to rid the country of Western influence and create an Islamic society. These are radical aims and can sometimes lead to radical social change- in the case of Iran, they led to a revolution. Sociologist, Nelson, identifies that there are many instances in history when social change and even revolution have been directed by religious beliefs. An example of this is when churches played an important part in the civil rights movement in the USA during the 1960s.

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Protests led by the Reverend Martin Luther King influenced the government to pass civil rights laws which banned segregation on the basis of skin colour. Nelson argues that an example such as this indicates how religion can 'spearhead resistance and revolution'. Although, for every example of this, there is another which shows religion encouraging the opposite response. For example, in the USA, some Black religious groups discouraged civil rights protests. Nelson's point is that in certain times and places, religion can be either a conservative or a radical force.

Another sociologist, Meredith McGuire asks the question, 'In what way and under what conditions does religion promote rather than inhibit change?' She says that religions with strong moral codes are more likely to be critical of the wider society and as a result, their members are more likely to demand change. She identifies that where religious beliefs are central to the culture of society, they are more likely to be used to justify or legitimate demands for stability or change.

She also says that if religious institutions are closely integrated with other parts of the social structure- for example, the political and economic systems- they have greater power to produce stability or change. Finally, she states that, religious institutions with a strong, centralised authority will have more power to affect stability or change. In conclusion I believe that is impossible to delegate religion as a whole to being either a radical force or a conservative force. It can be either depending on the situation- time and place. This will continue to be a major debate throughout Sociology.