

# The classical sociological theory of religion



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Sociology of religion is famous in that it does not set out to assess the rationality of religious beliefs. The comparing of multiple conflicting religious principles will require “methodological atheism” as stated by Austrian Sociologist Peter L. Berger. However, the sociology of religion generally contrasts from theology in assuming unimportance to the mystical aspects. Classical sociological theorists of the late 19th and early 20<sup>th</sup> century such as Karl Marx, Emile Durkheim, Max Weber and W. E. B. Du Bois were significantly interested in religion and its effects on society. Like Aristotle and Enlightenment philosophers from the 17th and 18th centuries, the concepts theorized by these sociologists continue to be studied today. Durkheim, Marx, Weber, and Du Bois had very complex and established theories about the nature and effects of religion. Religion was measured to be a vital social variable in the work of all four men. This essay will compare their theory’s and answer why they are set out to prove positive or negative for society.

The historical truth that institutions have functioned to back a ruling power and the social classes it has protected is very prevalent in all societies. Karl Marx believed religion is a social institution that is reliant on economic and material goods in a functioning society (Marx p. 56). The history of religion proves to be a product of productive forces. As Marx wrote, “The religious world is but the reflex of the real world” (Marx 1887). Religion can only be understood in comparison to other social systems and the economic structures of society. The religious doctrines are almost unrelated. This would be functionalist explanation of religion and understanding religion is reliant on what social purpose religion serves, and not the actual content.

Marx's belief was that religion is an illusion that offers reasons and explanations to keep society functioning just as it is. According to Marx, "Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, just as it is the spirit of a spiritless situation. It is the opium of the people" (Marx & Hegel 1844). Just like capitalism, it takes our productive labor and alienates us from its value, religion takes our ideals and aspirations and alienates us from them. It is a projection on an unknowable being, called a god. There are multiple reasons why Marx may have disliked religion. Initially it is illogical, religion is a misconception and worship that dodges fundamental reality. Additionally, religion disproves all that is well known in a human being by interpreting them submissive and more docile to accepting the status quo. And finally, religion is hypocritical, although it might have valuable principles, it sides with the bourgeoisie. Jesus encouraged serving the poor, but the Christian church worked with the oppressive Roman state, taking part in the enslavement of people for hundreds of years. In the middle ages, the Catholic church preached about heaven but acquired as much power and land as possible.

For most, religion is seen through faith or teachings that are thought to be true. Marx had a hard time believing in unseen truths. The basis of his argument is that humans should be directed by reason and that religion was concealing the truth and misleading followers. He believed that when someone views society and life through the lens of religion, they are blinded to the realities of their own life. He saw that the proletariat used their religion as a means to find comfort in their circumstances, therefore supporting the process of alienation.

In conjunction with Marx, Emile Durkheim observed religion with the context of an entire society and recognized its place in manipulating the thinking and behavior of individuals of a society. According to Durkheim, individuals see religion as contributing to the health and maintenance of society overall (Durkheim p. 151). Therefore, religion functions to bind society's members by motivating them to support their common values and beliefs every day. On the other hand, Marx understood that religion served a purpose or a function in society but did not agree as to the basis of that function.

Durkheim observed Totemism systems of Australian aborigines and labeled them as an elementary form of religion (Edles p. 147). Durkheim found that people tend to isolate religious symbols, objects, and rituals, which are "sacred", from the everyday symbols, objects, and routines, which are "profane". Sacred items are regularly believed to have divine properties that are distinct from profane objects (Edles p. 147).

Durkheim predicted that religion's impact would decrease as society modernizes. He also thought that scientific thinking would replace religious thinking. People would give little devotion to rituals and ceremonies. The idea of God is on the threshold of extinction and as an alternative, society will encourage civil religion. For instance, local celebrations, parades, and patriotism take the place of church gatherings. If traditional religion were to continue it would do so only to maintain social cohesion and order.

Durkheim's theory is applied to religion in general, and his conclusions are based on an imperfect set of examples. Max Weber, in contrast, introduced a large-scale study of religions around the world across all popular beliefs. He led in depth studies of Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Ancient

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Judaism. In the *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Weber studied the influence of Christianity on Western rational and principles. The vital purpose of Weber's research was to determine religion's influence on social change. For instance, in the Protestant Work Ethic, Weber saw the origins of capitalism. Eastern religions, on the other hand, are barriers to capitalism. For example, Hinduism focuses on achieving higher levels of spirituality by avoiding the stresses of the everyday physical world. This viewpoint does not support or promote producing or spending money. Weber thought that Christianity was a salvation religion that people can be saved when they become accustomed to their firm beliefs and morals. In Christianity, the idea of sin and its punishment by God's grace plays an essential part (Edles p. 193).

According to Weber, Protestant laborer generates wealth by constant work, and unlike the monk, the protestant laborer does not reject property with an oath to being poor. Property does not provide a burden on the believer, but rather a task to be performed for god's glory (Weber p. 187). The basis of capitalism is what Weber most notably called a "calling," a theory that emerges from the spirit of capitalism. It is a religious basis that an individual is called by god and applies to both owners and workers. Just as a person is called to work in a specific occupation or career, a person is called to make money. Weber argues, that they are connected to an obligation to self-discipline, not the abstinence of medieval monks but a frugal life. From an economic stand point, the achievement of money does not provide a living of more luxurious or comfortable life in a material sense, but somewhat in believing psychologically that one has fulfilled their calling.

Weber's main concern was the religious origin of the world and how it influenced economic actions of various societies and especially the western society. W. E. B Dubois took it one step further and applied methodological and empirical standards to his studies of the Black Church. A study that observes the functionality of religion but also acknowledges real time phenomena in America. Surveys and ethnographic data were combined to provide a full picture of the role of the Black Church in the African American community (Wortham 2009). He talked about the social structure of African American religious identity and provided a functional investigation of the Black Church. Linking between religion and social class, Du Bois developed congregational studies while addressing church involvement patterns. Being "left out" from the country around them, black people were left to form their own world within the church. It provided community, education, and governance. Religion helps provide both a foundation of strength and an outlet for the bitterness and sorrow that slavery left behind. Du Bois also explains "spirituals" and how they are the most attractive form of expression to come out of the US. Spirituals are mocked by white people who see them as vulgar and a misrepresentation of them (Du Bois p. 387). Despite that spirituals continue to be an important art for the African American community, mainly because they offer a chance to link generations back through slavery and give an idea their internal thoughts and state of mind.

In summary, some people associate religion with places of worship like a church and others with a practice, such as confession or meditation. Still, others are left with an impression that leads their daily lives. All four theorist

have reached an agreement that religion is a structure of values, practices, and beliefs about what a person embraces sacred or reflects to be spiritually important. Religion similarly acts as a filter for analyzing other problems in society and other mechanisms of a culture. Sociological methods like surveys, interviews, polls, and the breakdown of historical data, can be used to study religion in a culture to help understand the part religion plays in everyone's lives and the way it impacts society.

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