

# Marx and Durkheim's views on religion



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How do sociologists define religion? Can a non-belief system (atheism) be a type of religion? Discuss.

In this essay, I will discuss how theorists such as Marx and Durkheim view religion as either a comfort for the oppressed or creates a unity where shared beliefs are expressed. This paper will also aim to address feminist views on religion being a tool to sexually discriminate women. The second part of the essay will discuss whether atheism can be viewed as a religion by using Buddhism as an example of using an atheistic doctrine but still follows the religious guidelines.

Firstly, I am going to discuss Marx's famous quote that is, 'religion is the opium of the people'. The theorist concentrates on the importance of opium and compares it to religion as it controls the working class from any revolutionaries, in the source: *Eight Theories of Religion*. This aspect will be useful in defining what religion is, in this case, the working class. Marx theorises, how opium is used to ease the pain as it created fantasies, which he compares to religion as, performing the same role for the poor by dulling the pain of oppression (Pals, 2006, p135). Hence, religion is an ideological tool used by the Bourgeoisie as, to bring solace to the individual by distracting them from the external causes that are affecting them. Religion does this by providing sacred texts such as, 'The rich man in his castle, The poor man at his gate, God made them high or lowly, And ordered their estate' (Christiansen, 2007, np). This articulates how religious texts justify the person's status as unavoidable and God-given. Therefore, to define religion from a Marxist's perspective, it does nothing to solve the problem of the suffering but merely blinds them from the reality, by providing hope of

an afterlife where they will finally be liberated. Marx puts it as a 'comforting business' (Pals, 2006, p135), as religion legitimates the status quo of the proletariat and the ruling class.

Fundamentally, the functional definition of religion is what it plays in terms of a social and psychological environment. Whereas psychological functional definitions clarify how religion affects individuals mentally such as, seeking salvation. This brings on to Durkheim expressing religion as 'a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and surrounded by prohibitions- beliefs and practices that unite its adherents in a single moral community called a church' (Durkheim, 1982 cited in Cosman 2001, pxxi). This defines the functional definition of religion as it outlines the beliefs and practices that have associations with what religion performs. Moreover, it explains that the significance of the church is a place where morals create a collective conscious, as they are shared in a collective circle. For instance, in Islam, it is encouraged for Muslims to join in the congregation (*Jama'at*) every Friday in the mosque to pray to God. This forms equality from the poor and rich standing together in worship as well as, unity because people meet one another and sharing their issues. Therefore, from a functionalist perspective, religion is useless without people, as religious ethics must spread to forge a community (Cosman, 2001, pxxii). Following this, Durkheim also identifies religion as 'a fundamental distinction between sacred and profane' (Durkheim, 1995 cited in Turner, 2010, p55). The definition of sacred refers to religious beliefs and anything that has a spiritual importance such as, an animal. Whereas, the profane is the complete opposite which refers to the ordinary, unholy

aspects of life. How does this define religion? Faiths doesn't always have to associate with a supreme being but anything that is attached to religious qualities is sacred; as it promotes shared collectiveness by worshipping the object.

Interestingly, religion maintains the status quo of patriarchy towards women and it is proclaimed that men may use religion to subordinate women. Adding on to this, 'women are [...] expected to adopt traditional and submissive roles' (Aldridge, 2013, p165). This suggests that religion is a mechanism to sexually discriminate women and keep them in their inferiority by using religious texts, laws, and customs to legitimate their subordination. For example, in sacred texts, they focus on male prophets and teachings of male gods, which is, mainly clarified by men. Following this, in Christian and Jewish stories, they often see women to the root to all-evil, for instance, the story of Adam and Eve it is seen as Eve's fault for giving Adam the apple that caused humanity to fall. Therefore, because of Eve, women are portrayed as seductive and temptation. Thus, generally, men see the need to legitimate their power over women as their sexuality is seen as a threat to them (Aldridge, 2013, p166). Furthermore, other instances where religion marginalises women is their participation in religious rituals are restricted because of menstruation. In particular, Islam does not allow women who are menstruating to touch the Qur'an. This may be seen a patriarchal towards women as it is ordered in the Quranic texts to not approach women sexually while there on their menses, as they are unclean. It is worth noting that Muslim women can still perform religious practices such as remembering Allah. It is interesting to point out that in Hinduism, women being restricted

is more severe than any other mainstream religions. For instance, women on their cycle are not permitted from entering the Hindu Temple or enter the kitchen (Woodhead, 2002, p25). Therefore, defining all religions as patriarchal would not be fair as other religions may be more restrictive towards women and favor male dominance. For example, many Christian women are now becoming priests or Muslim women adorning the hijab or veil that allows them to be liberated by entering the public sphere. Turning now to the question of whether how do sociologists define religion? Weber emphasises how sexuality in religion is a powerful weapon that controls the reproduction, by introducing laws and norms to dominate women's sexuality i. e. laws condemning abortion (2013, p165). Therefore, religion is a way of controlling the population by using scriptures to subordinate women.

Answering the second part of the question as to whether atheism is to be considered a religion, we must first consider whether religion would be present in a non-belief system where there are prayers and sacrifices (Cosman, 2001, p32). For example, in Durkheim's study of the Totem, he argues that religion don't have to be based on believing in a supernatural being but for religion to be present there must be a sense of community where rituals are practiced. Therefore, from a functionalist perspective, it is crucial as to whether these practices create a bond between individuals. It is useful in identifying if atheism is a religion, as its general beliefs are not accepting that God or any supreme being exists and rejecting the idea of an afterlife. However, going on to the second point, Buddhism is considered a religion even though it does not believe in the divine but does regard life after death to be true i. e. reincarnation. Besides, even if the ' doctrine is

absolutely atheist' (Barth, 1882 cited in Cosman, 2001, p32), it still has a belief system known as the 'Four Noble Truths' (Cosman, 2001, p32). For that reason, Buddhism is a religion even though atheistically it denies any existence of God; what's important is it has its own morals and festivals that unites everyone in a collective group. Therefore, atheism can be considered as a religion as it holds dogmatic beliefs about there being no God which goes for the same as a religion as thinking there is God.

In contrast, a non-belief system such as atheism cannot be recognised as a religion, for one reason it does not 'involve [...] in belief in spiritual beings and [...] gods' (McKown, 1975, p137). Atheism does not follow any spiritual beings means it has no morals and ethics of those following the aesthetic system. It gives no direction as to what is right or wrong like other major faiths. Also, the non-belief system gives no guidance to its followers such as having rituals or referring to a holy book. It is worth noting that religion provides a clergy, faith schools, spiritual building, and atheism does not; it only shares a common ideology that there is no God. Another relevant point to add is that religion offers hope and certainty to individuals by sharing positive beliefs, whereas atheism gives no values to have a purposeful life.

In conclusion, religion from a Marxist perspective legitimatises the inferior position of the working class as the sacred scriptures offer positive beliefs to the poor who are experiencing oppression, in a way religion acts as a 'comforting business'. In contrast, it is defined from a feminist view, as legitimising women's subordination to men, by using sacred texts to demonise them and restrict them from spiritual practices. Further, I tried to focus on the problem from a religious perspective trying to show whether

atheism can be classified as a faith. Durkheim emphasises how it's not necessary for a theology to believe in God if shared beliefs and practices are the main features in the faith, only this can be considered a religion as it must 'unite its adherents in a single moral community'.

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