

Marx and weber within religion

Religion



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Marx and Durkheim jointly cover the nucleus of the sociological thought on various issues. They encompass the major issues within the sociological tradition. Religion remained their favorite sociological subject and they have speculated over the issue in the modern sociological context. Marxian reflection on the sociology of religion is very limited whereas Durkheim has contributed largely on the philosophical and sociological issues pertaining to religion. Marx is considered as an avant-garde sociologist on the concept of religion.

Being influenced by Hegel's philosophy, Marx considers religion is a manifestation of "material realities and economic injustice". Therefore, he labels problems in religion are eventually ultimate social problems. Most of the Marxian thought on the sociological aspects of religion is reflected in the quite a few opening paragraphs of his "Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right: Introduction." These are the same passages that include his widely quoted pronouncement on religion, that "it is the opium of the people."

Nevertheless, this statement by Marx can not be taken as demonstration of Marxian religious view. It is often misquoted devoid of its context. Marx's starts his essay "Contribution to a Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right" with such words; "For Germany the criticism of religion is in the main complete, and criticism of religion is the premise of all criticism." (Marx 1964B: 43) This raises the concerns why Marx has pronounced religious criticism as the essential element of all criticisms. The basic factor that compelled Marx to declare religious criticism as the basic form was the magnitude of significance that religion holds in the lives of humans.

Now the question arises why Marx has declared the criticism of religion as the basic of all criticisms. John Macmurrary considers that it was the acknowledgement of historical judgment on the part of Marx. It was an illustration of his understanding on the social function of religion. He says in this regard;

By criticism, in this phrase, we must be careful to understand what Marx understood by it, not the blank denial of religion, but the historical understanding of its necessity and function in society, which leads to its dialectical negation when its function is completed. Marx meant that the understanding of religion was the key to the understanding of social history. (Macmurrary 1935: 219)

Mckown reinforces the same understanding like McMurray that Marx deems religion as a useful social tool and this thinking developed as profound analysis of social history pertaining to religion. But Mckown further emphasizes that this statement has too much generalization. (Mckown, 1975. p. 46)

Marx further asserts that religion is the production of social evolution and it serves society and state in several ways. He does not eulogize religion but consider it of vital importance for layman as it enriches their lives with sense of worth. He says in this regards;

Religion is, indeed, the self-consciousness and self-esteem of man who has either not yet won through to himself, or has already lost himself again. But man is no abstract being squatting outside the world. Man is the world of man—state, society. This state and this society produce religion, which is an <https://assignbuster.com/marx-and-weber-within-religion/>

inverted consciousness of the world, because they are an inverted world. Religion is the general theory of this world, its encyclopedic compendium, its logic in popular form, its spiritual point d'honneur, its enthusiasm, its moral sanction, its solemn complement, and its universal basis of consolation and justification. It is the fantastic realization of the human essence since the human essence has not acquired any true reality. The struggle against religion is, therefore, indirectly the struggle against that world whose spiritual aroma is religion. (Marx, 1964)

Appraisal of religion is primary as religion creates the inverted delusions that the religion world i. e life hereafter, deities etc. is factual and that the material world is a shadow of that real life. So in his criticism of “ religion”, he hit any religion that capsizes the physical world from being the primary reality. As an acquittal from his explicit attack on, Marx lessens his negative perception by evaluating the foundational purpose of religion in this way;

“ Religious suffering is at the same time an expression of real suffering and a protest against real suffering. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the sentiment of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people.”

Marx's religious viewpoint is not sympathetic toward religion and he does not consider it an extra-human phenomenon. But he is of the view that religion is a product of society in order to provide solace to the distressed people. It was the mechanization of the poor to create an illusory world for themselves to create an escape from harsh realities of life. So he thinks that abolition of religion is necessary to eradicate the illusory world and create

an environment for their real happiness. He says that religion is not a malady in itself but it is the indication and the remedy (simultaneously) of that malady i. e. religion is an expression and solution to a more fundamental happiness.

So Marxian assertions about religion are not negative as they are often understood and interpreted. It manifests that Marx has a "partial validation of religion" until a suitable economic system does not remove the causes that created it.

Marxian idea of religion derives its strength from his idea of "alienation". He thinks that it was "alienation" [1] that dehumanize the individuals and religious opium comes as a minimum resistance by the exploited people that provides illusory hope against the real exploitation. Another Marxian critic, Norman Birnbaum (1969), interprets this phenomenon in his way, to Marx, "religion is a spiritual response to a condition of alienation." (p. 126)

Illustrating the ultimate and real purpose of religion (contrary to the view of the common folk), he further explains Marxian view; "Religion was conceived to be a powerful conservative force that served to perpetuate the domination of one social class at the expense of others." (Ibid 127)." So this is a cause and effect phenomenon as this illusory hope of common and exploited folk further distorts the socio-economic condition and in this way self-alienation of individual increases with more reliance on religion.

Raines[2] sums up the Marxian sociology of religion in this way;

" Like the Hebrew prophets of old, Marx knew that to speak of social justice we must become socially self-critical, and that means becoming critical of the ruling powers—whether they be kings or priests or investment bankers.... For Marx, all ideas are relative to the social location and interests of their production. And like the prophets before him, the most revealing perspective is not from the top down or the center outward, but the... point of view of the exploited and marginalized. Suffering can see through and unveil official explanations; it can cry out and protest against the arrogance of power." (Raines)

To Durkheim, religion was a social phenomenon that originates directly from the social needs of a society but he considers it an essential regulating force that shapes and determines the consciousness of a society. But its most important purpose is social cohesion. A close analysis of history by Durkheim[3] reflected that religion is a valid and vital force that binds the individuals and societies together. Describing Durkheim motives to study religion on a broader level, Lewis Coser write in his monumental work "Matters of Sociological Thought";

Durkheim's earlier concern with social regulation was in the main focused on the more external forces of control, more particularly legal regulations that can be studied, so he argued, in the law books and without regard to individuals. Later he was led to consider forces of control that were internalized in individual consciousness. Being convinced that " society has to be present within the individual," Durkheim, following the logic of his own theory, was led to the study of religion, one of the forces that created within

individuals a sense of moral obligation to adhere to society's demands.

(Cosser, 1977. p. 136)

Durkheim main concern was trace down the social origin of religion. the sociological interpretation of religion. For this purpose, he tried to comprehend the basic forms of social religions. He illustrated that Australian Totemism is the most rudimentary form of a religion. He considers that it was the basic social necessity of the social entity that compelled that group to devise a religious activity.

Further explaining the social origin of religion, Durkheim says that religion is an epitome of social cohesion. To Durkheim, society was not a mere collection of individual but it has other internal and external dimensions. Internally, it is the substantial device that moulds our beliefs and attitudes while on the external horizon, it exerts and maintains pressures from the society to facilitate conformity to the above-mentioned collective beliefs and attitudes. For these two purposes, it devised the religious activity. He thought that the absolute purpose of religion is to enable people to show a willingness put their individual interests and personal propensities and to put interests of society ahead of their own.

So it capacitates the people to get ready for a cohesive social life. Ultimately, if individuals want to be happy, so they must regulate their individual needs and aspirations and their propensities must be confined into limits. This regulatory role must thus be executed by an external agency superior to the individual i. e. by society. Both these features of social facts explain clearly that society is an independent entity that works for the collective benefits

and does not surrender to individual proclivities and requirements. Religion acts as social tool for this regulatory role of society. Religion internalizes that regulatory process and individuals act on that as an obligation. Durkheim considers religion as “society divinised” because religion only acts in the social domain.

Durkheim observes god of divine manifestations of it as society itself. He takes god in the functional perspective and attributes functional traits to god and further links these characteristics to social phenomenon. For example, he says that “god is first of all a being that man conceives of as superior to himself in some respects and one on whom he believes he depends. ... Society also fosters in us the sense of perpetual dependence. ... Society requires us to make ourselves its servants, forgetful of our own interests”. (Elementary Forms for Religious Life, p. 208-209).

Durkheim deems religion as “a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden—beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them” (Elementary Forms for Religious Life, p. 47).

He makes an important distinction in religious domain that is based on the separation of human experiences i. e. profane and the Sacred. Profane is the dominion of mundane life experiences i. e. routine work, daily life activities etc. This sphere has an ultimate utilitarian approach. The sacred realm constitutes of non-mundane experiences that includes the recognition of a non-empirical authority and non-utilitarian activities. He says in this regard;

A society whose members are united by the fact that they think in the same way in regard to the sacred world and its relations with the profane world, and by the fact that they translate these common ideas to common practices, is what is called a Church. In all history, we do not find a single religion without a Church. (Elementary Forms for Religious Life, p. 44)

So a superior fusion of profane and sacred life makes the social cohesion that is necessary to put the civilization on the path of progress and prosperity. He describes the social association as an incarnation of relation between individuals and divinity. Coser says in this regard; " Religion is eminently social: it occurs in a social context, and, more importantly, when men celebrate sacred things, they unwittingly celebrate the power of their society. This power so transcends their own existence that they have to give it sacred significance in order to visualize it. (Coser, 1977. p. 136)

Durkheim does not support Comte's assertion that humans must endeavor to create a new " humanitarian cult" based on the rational principles. Durkheim like Marx does not suggest an abrupt ending to religion but reinforces the Marxian that it should work until an appropriate alternative does not replace this vital sociological tool. He says in this regard, " We must discover the rational substitutes for these religious notions that for a long time have served as the vehicle for the most essential moral ideas." (MoralEducation, 1961. p. 9)

Coser sums up the religions ultimate function as described by Durkheim, in this way;

Finally, religion has a euphoric function in that it serves to counteract feelings of frustration and loss of faith and certitude by reestablishing the believers' sense of well-being, their sense of the essential rightness of the moral world of which they are a part. By countering the sense of loss, which, as in the case of death, may be experienced on both the individual and the collective level, religion helps to reestablish the balance of private and public confidence. (Coser, 1976. p. 139)

So Both Marx and Durkheim consider religion important social tools that give purpose and meaning to the human life.[4] Both consider the values of world religions i. e. intrinsic value and dignity of human perspective an important element but Marx views it as a toll of the oppressor to perpetuate its practices and to provide a fictitious idealism of human dignity to the common folk. However both consider institution of religion as an imperative social necessity hitherto.

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[1] Chiodi, the famous Marxian critic, Has defined Marx concept of alienation in these words; " It is the negative process by which a subject makes himself other than himself by virtue of a constraint which is capable of being removed on the initiative of the subject himself. " (Chiodi, 1976. p. 80)

[2] John Raines is Professor of Religion at Temple University.

[3] Most of the Durkheim's critics regards his findings as theoretical and ahistorical contemplations but Bellah is of the view that " Almost all of [Durkheim's] own researches draw heavily from historical and ethnological

sources and are in fact organized in an historical framework" (p. 448).

[4] Durkheim considers it the ultimate function whereas Marx labels it as inverted and pretended reality.