

Is religion a good
force for the society?



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Is religion a good force for the society?

The role of religion in our society has always been debated. Some people are of the view that, religion helps in bringing about a change in society, while other believe it does the very opposite. However, sociologists have a different view on this. They say that religion adopts a middle path. It brings about change and also acts as a conservative force.

The notion that religion can help bring about a change is rejected by many theories, including the theory of functionalism and Marxism. It is the effect of such theories which have given birth to the view that religion is a force of conservatism. However, there is still difference between these two theories as well. Functionalists say that, the norms and values on which our society has been built are reinforced by religion. According to Durkheim, religion performs many functions. One of these functions is to ensure that there is harmony and stability in the society. For instance, functionalists say that, when people of the society pray together, it helps in making the society into a single unit. When people become a single unit, the unity of the group increases the bond between the society members is strengthened. Religion in other words is a kind of glue. In fact, it's " social glue", one that enables solidarity to prevail in society. For instance, Durkheim studied a society of traditional Aboriginal people. In his study, he got to know that totems are the main focus of this particular type of society, through which they show their solidarity towards the values that they have learnt. This is one form of solidarity and integration of people into the society.

On the other hand, Marxists have a different take on religion. According to them religion brings about conservatism. They say that this is because,

<https://assignbuster.com/is-religion-a-good-force-for-the-society/>

religion seeks to make sure that one class is superior and dominant over the other. Marxists have the view point that, the current inequalities in our social surrounding is due to the fact that religion makes one class dominant over the other. The inequalities are mainly due to two things. First and foremost, it is due to the ownership of the means to produce things and secondly, the people who act as employers are easily able to exploit the working class.

Marx famous lines on this believe is, “ Religion is the opium of the masses”.

He connect the drug opium to religion saying, just like opium, religion makes sure that people who are suffering can bear the pain and it takes them into a dream where they feel happy, when in fact the reality is quite the opposite.

Religion is able to do this by, telling people that in the next life they will be given eternal bliss. This promise of bliss makes it easier for people to bear the current suffering and in this way religion justifies the inequality that prevails in society. Class consciousness is stopped from growing by religion. When there is no class consciousness, it is not possible to bring about a revolution. Thus in this way, religion prevents any kind of change in society.

Those who are Feminists also agree with the theory, that religion is conservative force. They say the system of patriarchal is also a part and parcel of this conservatism. For example, the fact that in many religions women are not allowed to be religious leaders and the fact that religions endorse the idea that women should stay and take care of the family and that is what their role should be after marriage, also shows that there is some kind of conservatism prevailing, which wishes that the role of women should be subservient and this stance is endorsed by many religions.

The above theories can be supported by many real life examples, which show that religion acts as a force of conservatism. One of the best examples, which support the view that Marxists have adopted is the Caste System in India. This cast system is fully supported by the Hindu religion. One more glaring example is the Medieval Europe Monarchs. Their right to rule was said to be their divine right. Their right to be the rulers was believed by the people of those times to be God-given. They had all the power and there was no one who could challenge them or any decision made by them. The above examples show the conservative force of religion. However, the problem is that these theories entirely reject the fact that religion can bring about change in society. Therefore the statement is not supported in entirety.

Even though both Marxism as well Functionalism gives an account of religion which is plausible, but their views are criticized by other sociologists, who argue that religion is not a conservative force at all. In fact, they say, religion is a force, a radical force which helps to bring about a change in society. The one who holds this view that, religion can bring about a revolution is Neo-Marxist Otto Maduro. He points to the catholic priests of the 1960's in Latin America, who used to criticize the bourgeoisie. These priests used to teach the Theology of Liberation. It means to free people from their oppression using religion. In both social actions as well as political actions there was collaboration between the Marxists and the Catholics. This was the main catalyst which gave birth to resistance and then led to social change. Consequently in 1979 the Somoza regime in Nicaragua was overthrown from power. This was due to the resistance and change in which the Catholics revolutionaries played a huge part.

Some more instances which show that religion was responsible for bringing about social change are also present. Another example of this can be seen during the time period of 1978 to 1985. During this time, Desmond Tutu who was the Archbishop during that time played a very important role in South Africa, when he opposed apartheid. What resulted from his efforts was that, he was the first black person who became Cape Town's Archbishop and led the Anglican Church. Other examples seen by Nelson (1986) include the opposition to communism by the Catholic Church in Poland, as well as in America, where there was a black civil-rights movement. These examples show how authority was undermined and a change was brought in.

Weber, one of the most influential classical sociologists also supports the view, that religion is a force which can bring about change. He strongly believed that religion can bring about change and from this belief he came up with his famous theory which said that, Capitalism developed due to Protestantism. There are many types of Protestantism, but Weber has focused on Calvinism. This is because the skilled workers as well as the entrepreneurs were Calvinists, in all the countries where, Western Capitalism prevailed. Weber talks about, how social change was brought about by Calvinism, in his book titled, " The Protestant Work Ethic and Spirit of Capitalism". " Ascetic ideal" was a very important factor in Calvinism, according to Weber. The ethic of hard work with lots of discipline is the basis of capitalism. In the early times, Calvinists followed the bible, their pleasures and entertainments were very simple and they lived a simple life, which was much disciplined. This led to the proper and correct ethics of work being developed, besides capital. In other words, the right conditions of the

economy and the religious belief in Protestantism was mainly responsible for the building of the system of Capitalism.

But this theory that Weber came up with has been criticized as well. It was claimed by Eisenstadt (1967), that the development of the system of capitalism has nothing to do with the idea of Calvin. This is because, in countries like Italy, which were catholic, Protestant Reformation came out after Capitalism. Other people, who criticize Weber, talk about the fact that there are many other economic factors which helped to develop capitalism. Some of these factors include, democracy, the influence that immigrants have on the economy and people as well as freedom of religion. Many other critics have disagreed with Weber and said he was wrong because he did not interpret Protestantism properly, he did not locate capitalism properly and last but not the least and he did not understand Catholicism. However, Weber had his share of supporters as well. Marshall (1982) says that people criticized Weber, because they were never able to understand his work. For instance, Weber simply demonstrated how Calvinism and Catholicism were related and how religion can bring change. He never said that there was any kind of casual relationship between the two.

The good thing about the work that Weber did is that, his work is able to show us clearly how religion has the power to change the society. The problem with his view is that, it completely ignores the simple fact that, it is possible for religion to be conservative in some cases and thus the statement put forward in the question is not fully supported.

Most of the sociologists believe in the middle path. They believe that religion has both sides. Religion can be a radical force which can bring about change and a conservative force which can stop the change from coming. It all depends on which religion it is and the circumstances that are prevailing in the country in which the change is coming. Thompson came out in support of this view. He identified the factors which are responsible for the role that religion will play in bringing change. For instance, he says that if there are no avenues which can bring change, like no political will to change then religion can step in to do so. Likewise, when such avenues are available (example economy), then religion will play a limited role and will have a more conservative nature.

In the end we can say that, religion is indeed a conservative force as well as a force which brings about change. This position is supported by the evidence which has been put forward in support of both views. It shows that religion has the capacity to take on both roles, the role of acting as a radical force as well as a conservative force. The thing that will determine what role religion takes will depend on two things, the religion and the society in question. Even though both the conservative side and the radical side have their supports and arguments, it is better to have a wider view if this, in contrast to a single view.