

Religion is the opium
of the people
philosophy essay



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“ Religion is the opium of the people” - Karl Marx, Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right, 1844

The construct of two uniquely different terms being used together often raises the “ eyes” of persons who focus on strategies to influence the thinking and actions of many persons. In this case, religion represents those persons around the globe who hold strongly held beliefs. Opium, conversely, often represents an addictive substance that shifts the ability of individuals to maintain control of their own faculties, abilities, or behaviors. Each term provides numerous images in the minds of people who “ value” either religion or the use of substances. In this case, however, the terms are used in a statement of emphasis that demands that one see the critical direction that Karl Marx was approaching in 1844.

According to Oxford Dictionaries (2009), Religion is the “ belief in and worship of a superhuman controlling power, especially a personal God or gods”. Opium is a “ reddish -brown heavy-scented addictive drug prepared from the juice of the opium poppy, used illicitly as a narcotic and occasionally in medicine as an analgesic”. The opium of the people is “ a thought and action-reaction regarded as inducing a false and unrealistic sense of contentment among people”. In this case, it is Religion, according to Marx. History reports that the majority of people believe that Marx criticizes religion as being a relief for the masses, in the way that it creates an illusory fantasy to the poor, assuring them that even if they are living in misery in this life, they will find true happiness in the afterlife, thus only masking the problem and not solving it. However, based on the sudden change in the 19th century (period in which Marx lived) of how opium is perceived, the <https://assignbuster.com/religion-is-the-opium-of-the-people-philosophy-essay/>

quote can be assessed in two ways; positively and negatively. This makes it interesting for us to analyze it since history plays a big part on how it should be understood.

Since prehistoric times, opium has been used worldwide. From Egypt to China, it was highly regarded and used for many things, such as to relieve pain, to bring courage and strength to soldiers, to reach a feeling of ecstasy or to get in touch with the divine. These practices continued and spread, until the 19th century, when its negative effects were being detected. At this point, opium was found to be addictive, sometimes lethal and had started to be regulated. The impact and harm that was done through the use of opium caused societies to consider changing the perspective held on the use of the drug. Eventually, the use of opium became illegal because its damage was significant to the members of every society where it was used.

Parenthetically, it was and sometimes still is being used for medical experiments and pain-reduction, delusional practices to this day and remains the most efficient pain-killer. However, despite the illegalization of opium and its derivatives, it was and is still being used by a wide variety of people in all parts of the world, most commonly in the form of heroin, in order to achieve a feeling of pleasure and to escape from reality.

In the 19th century, opium was responsible for two wars that took place between the United Kingdom and China. The "Opium Wars" occurred because China illegalized the drug though the United Kingdom continued to traffic it in China, through India.

After having had an overview on the history of opium, we can now deduce the different possible meanings that Marx conveys in his quote.

In a first perspective, Marx could imply that “ religion is the opium of the people” in a positive manner. This being the case, Marx meant that opium provides comfort and relief. Since Marx was a big supporter of the proletarian movement, which in his time was working in horrible conditions and leading miserable lives in cities, Marx might have insinuated that religion’s purpose was to create illusory fantasies for the poor as opium did for drug abusers and addicts. Economic realities often prevented the poor and to a large extent, even the aristocrats, from finding true happiness in this life; so religion tells them that this is OK because through a belief in God, through accepting the power and authority of God; through dying and going to heaven, one will find true happiness in the next life. Additionally, religion might bring comfort to people in hard times, for example during times of war, when people would pray for God to protect them, or after the death of a loved one, thinking this person would go to heaven and be at peace.

Another argument would be that religion and opium give courage to people. Christians and Muslims believe that God Allah is always with them, protecting them and loving them, which could boost their confidence and make them feel they can do anything with “ God on their side”. Lastly, religion can give, for some, a purpose to life - based on the principles and tenets of God suggesting that God has a plan for each human being.

Moreover, it explains all that science is unable to explain, for example the creation of the Human race. Effectually, what is not scientific is created by faith — often unchallengeable in the eyes of rational thought. To conclude, <https://assignbuster.com/religion-is-the-opium-of-the-people-philosophy-essay/>

Marx could be stating by his quote that people are in distress and religion provides solace, just as people who are physically injured receive relief from opiate-based drugs.

On the other hand, Marx could very well be criticizing religion. First of all, opiates do not fix a physical injury, they merely make you forget pain for a limited time; this is a good thing only if you work on solving the underlying roots of the pain. Equivalently, religion doesn't fix people's pain, it simply conceals their reasons of suffering and causes them to look ahead to an illusory future when the pain will cease, instead of working on changing their present condition. In other words, Religion as opium creates an imaginary world that prevents people from being accountable for their own lives and their own futures since they believe their path is traced and controlled by a certain " God". They are thus led to let things happen and not be responsible for the situation in which they are. Moreover, religion is used as a control mechanism that gives power and authority of some over the masses. The desire to create a collective unconscious that diminishes the power of man to an acquiescing to the power and authority of a higher power - often unseen and unknown. Because of the unknown nature -there is a concern that the higher power is infinite; man is finite, and in that finite nature, man can never be in control of his own destiny. Thus, man must acquiesce to the power of the higher authority, and its emissary on earth - the Church. However, the church is the work of man and is bound to be flawed. For example, regarding Christianity, Jesus advocated helping the poor, but the Christian church merged with the oppressive Roman state, taking part in the enslavement of people for centuries. In the Middle-Ages the Catholic Church

preached about heaven, but acquired as much property and power as possible.

Finally, religion, just like opium, is a cause of war. Opium was the cause of two wars between the United Kingdom and China in the 19th century. Similarly, religion was the cause of the crusades, a war between Christians and Muslims that lasted nearly two centuries. This could be one of the reasons why Marx associated the word opium with religion.

The quote “ Religion is the opium of the people” can apply to the two major religions: Christianity and Islam. Both religions believe in one God, and both believe in a final judgment, where a person is judged according to their actions on earth, and then sent to either Heaven, place of joy and bliss where they will be happy, either in Hell where they will spend an eternity of misery. On the other hand, other religions such as Hinduism and Buddhism believe in reincarnation of the spirit, which means the person might or might not be happy in his new life, and this excludes Marx’s theory of religion being a comfort to the people.