

## Marx: Religion as Ideological Weapon

"Religion is the opium of the people" is one of the most frequently paraphrased statements of German socialist Karl Marx. "

For him, religion is an expression of man's imperfect self-awareness: not man as abstract individual, but social man, or human collective. It is a distortion of man's being, society has been distorted. In some of Marx's most celebrated words, "it is the heart of a heartless world and the soul of soulless conditions, the opium or the painkiller- of the suffering masses". The way to real happiness is for men to free themselves from the kind of life that made them crave this substitute.

Marx understood that religion served a purpose or a function in society but did not agree as to the basis of that function. For most, religion is seen through faith or teachings that are held to be true. Religion teaches morality, values, and beliefs that a society will hold its evaluation of behavior against. Marx had a hard time believing in unseen truths. The basis of his argument is that humans should be led by reason and that religion was masking the truth and misleading followers. He believed that when one views society and life through the lens of religion, they are blinded to the realities of their life. Religion, then, was a false hope and comfort to the poor. He saw that poor used their religion as a means to find comfort in their circumstances, thus aiding in the process of alienation.

He emphasized that self-emancipation is not merely desirable; it is man's *duty* to realize his highest potential by throwing off everything that kept him imperfect and degraded. A determined struggle against all religion seems *essential for progress*.

All major religions have complex histories and consist of doctrines that are often highly ambiguous and sometimes internally inconsistent. Whether they know it or not, believers have to pick and choose what parts of a particular tradition to embrace and how to interpret them in the circumstances in which they find themselves. That is why religious traditions have so many different currents and why it is possible to create a religious justification for almost any course of action. Over the centuries, religions have been *interpreted and reinterpreted to serve the interests of particular groups*.

Religion does relieve the *tension of economic deprivation* by substituting the value of religious achievement for economic achievement, and this substitution may indeed have an opiate effect because pressure for change is defused.

Examples that support his theories on religion:

- Research into the caste system in India show how religion was used to justify the oppression and exploitation of the lower castes by the members of upper caste.
- In mediaeval Europe Kings and Queens were said to rule by divine right.

- The Egyptian pharaohs combined and believed that both God and King were the same person.
- In the southern states of America, during times of slavery, slave owners often approved of the conversion of slaves to Christianity. They genuinely believed that taking, controlling and forcibly converting the slaves to Christianity was a gentling influence. Christianity also became the means through which slaves accepted their positions in society. They used prayer and worship to get them through some of the most tumultuous and traumatic times the world has seen.
- Sociologists and historians have also commented that during the Industrial Revolution in England, where there was much upheaval and times of uncertainty for new workers within factories, that religion was used abundantly in order to control the masses. Religion was used to encourage the workers to remain sober and to work hard.