Evaluate the Marxist Perspective of Religion

Sociologists have long been divided on the subject of religion. From the Marxist’s perspective, religion is a form of oppression. They believe that religion is a socially constructed conservative force used by the bourgeoisie to keep the proletariat from revolting. Karl Marx even went so far as to say that “religion is the opium of the people”. This means that it numbs the pain of being working class so that there won’t be a revolution. Religion acts as compensation for not being part of the bourgeoisie and working class people believed that if they accepted the life they had now, then they would be rewarded in the next life.

To demonstrate the viewpoint of the Marxist’s it is useful to refer to Susan Budd’s study of workers in Clark’s shoe factory. This study perfectly explains why Marxists believe religion is a form of control over the proletariat. Budd discovered that the owner of Clark’s shoe factory had a list of all of the workers to take with them to church. If one of the workers was not at church at the weekend, they would be fired the following Monday. This supports the view that capitalists used religion as a means of keeping the proletariat sober so they would be productive at work.

A criticism of their view of religion is religion no longer being used to justify status. Marxists believe that by enforcing religion, the bourgeoisie gain control of the proletariat more easily. However, most powerful leaders, with the exception of George Bush, now no longer make reference to religion.

A second critique is that they ignore secularisation – the decline in religion. If religion really was used by the ruling class to control and oppress the workers, then it wouldn’t be dying out, because they wouldn’t let it. The majority of people now no longer believe in or follow a religion but even without religion, capitalism still continues to exist. Marxists also ignore that in some communist countries people still choose to have private worship. If religion really was the cause of capitalism, then this wouldn’t be possible.

Neo-Marxists can also be used to criticise the traditional Marxist perspective of religion. For example Otto Maduro who believed religion could be used to free people from false class consciousness and alienation. Maduro said religion can create freedom for the oppressed (the working class). He used examples such as Archbishop Desmond Tutu and Martin Luther King Jr to show how religion can be used to change society for good rather than to oppress and control. Archbishop Desmond Tutu used his religious beliefs to abolish apartheid in South Africa. However, a counter critique of Maduro is that the change made by religion is more to do with racism. Although there is no apartheid in South Africa anymore, it is still a capitalist country.

Further support for the argument from theNeo-Marxists can be found from the ideas of Antonio Gramsci. He believed that although we could function without religion, if we still wanted to have one, we should scrap the religions we have and replace it with another faith that encourages equality for all. He thought that if we could change the hegemony then religion couldn’t be used as an ideological state apparatus.

A contrasting view of religion is that of the Functionalists. They believe religion is good for society as it brings everybody together and gives people something to believe in.