Assess the view that religion still performs important functions for society.

Sociologists are divided on the subject of whether or not religion is still important for society. Religion can include traditional forms of worship and more modern worship, for example New Religious Movements.

A perspective to consider in this debate is that of the Marxists. Karl Marx believed religion was the “opium of the people” and by saying this he meant that religion acted as a drug to numb the pain of being working class and being oppressed by the bourgeoisie. Marxists believe that the only function religion performs is to oppress the working class and prevent a true class conscience and therefore it isn’t performing an important function for all of society, only the ruling class. Ex-American president George Bush can be used as evidence for this perspective because he frequently referred to God wanting him to be president in his campaigns. Bush used religious beliefs as a tool to put himself into more power. Susan Budd explained how factory owners used religion to control the proletariat by enforcing church-going on Sundays so that the workers couldn’t get drunk and would therefore continue to be productive at work. If workers weren’t at church on Sunday then they would be fired first thing on Monday. This shows how religion is a social construction and was used as a tool by the bourgeoisie to oppress the proletariat. To conclude the Marxist perspective, they believe religion isn’t performing important functions for society because its sole purpose is to be a conservative force keeping society capitalist and with a false class conscience.

A critique of the Marxist perspective of religion is the view of the Neo-Marxists. Firstly, Gramsci said that we need to change the hegemony – which means ‘the dominant way of thinking’ – of religion to make it so that it doesn’t oppress anybody. He thinks that religion could still perform an important function for society but it isn’t at the moment because it’s wrong. This is similar to the New Right perspective. Gramsci says we should scrap the religions we already have and replace it with a new one that encourages equality. Another Neo-Marxist also criticises the Marxist view of religion by saying that religion can be used to free people from oppression. He uses examples such as Martin Luther King Jr and Archbishop Desmond Tutu. Tutu abolished apartheid in South Africa, using his religious beliefs to make this possible. This shows how religion can have an important function in society. However, a counter critique of this is that although there is no longer apartheid in South Africa, it is still a capitalist country with working class and ruling class.

Another critique of Marxists is that they ignore that religious beliefs can be used for good and that it can benefit people, performing a very important function for society. They ignore that it can create social solidarity and has positive psychological functions.

An important perspective to consider in this debate is that of the Functionalists, who believe religion performs important functions for both individuals and society as a whole. Malinowski, who studied small islands in the South Pacific, found that when fishermen went to sea they would often perform religious rituals before doing so, unlike when they went fishing in the river. This was because fishing in the sea was unpredictable and dangerous whereas the rivers were safe and catch was reliable. Performing these religious rituals before going to sea, it seemed, gave the fishermen a sense of comfort and performed an important function for them and for their culture. In the South Pacific religion was very important and was incorporated into everyday life as it reinforced social norms and values and created social solidarity. This suggests religion does still perform important functions for society. Durkheim said that religion was good for not only individuals but society as a whole. He said