

## Unit 5

# Marxian Theory

---

### Contents

- 5.1 Introduction
- 5.2 Marxian Social Thought
- 5.3 Marxian Notion of Religion
- 5.4 Religion - An Instrument of Oppression
- 5.5 The Dominant Ideology - Religion
- 5.6 Religion as Super Structure
- 5.7 Marx on 'Jewish Question'
- 5.8 Criticisms to Marxian Approach to the Study of Religion
- 5.9 Conclusion
- 5.10 Further Reading

### Learning Objectives

After studying this unit you should be able to:

- describe the Marxian notion of religion;
- outline the dominant ideology - religion;
- examine religion as a superstructure; and
- give some criticisms to the Marxian approach to the study of religion.

## 5.1 Introduction

Although Karl Marx did not publish a specific monograph on religion, his analyses of religion are very significant. He can be said to be the first sociologist of religion. His interpretations of religion are mainly being drawn from *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right: Introduction* (1844) and *German Ideology* (1845).

Marx was highly critical of religion. For him man makes religion, religion does not make man (Marx cf. Tucker 1978: 53). Marx considered religious sentiments as all other social institutions as a social product. He proposed that religion reflects society; therefore, any criticism of religion must *ipso facto* be a criticism of society itself. It is essentially a projection of social relationships involved in the process of production. He proposes that religion does not reflect man's true consciousness. Religion, as Marx sees it, is a false consciousness; religion is the product of men, the product of those in power – those who control the productive process and people fail to understand that religion is man made. Religion comes to divert people's attention from their miseries, which are the consequences of exploitation. He states that religion is only the illusory sun, which revolves round man as long as he does not revolve round himself (Pals, D.L. 1996). And he argues in a truly socialist communist society all illusions and distortions of reality disappear and need for any religion ceases.

The present unit will focus on the Marxian interpretation of religion. It will discuss on how Marx conceptualizes religious beliefs and values, how it

operates in the existing social system and also the role of religious conceptions in legitimising the existing social system. The unit also includes criticisms to Marxian interpretation of religious conceptions.

In order to understand Marx's perspective on religion it is necessary to know briefly his overall thesis about the working of the society. Marxian understanding of religion will be clearer when placed in his larger social thought. So let us have a brief look at his theory of economic determinism.

## 5.2 Marxian Social Thought

Marxian theory is exclusively based on the production of material objects in the society. For survival, human beings produce food and material objects and for doing so the individuals enter into social relationship with each other making the process of production a social enterprise. The mode of production was the focus of social analysis for Marx. Depending on the mode of production he classifies the history into different epochs; each epoch identified with a particular mode of production. In each of these historical periods the groups of people who own the forces of production rule the society and they exploit and oppress the rest of the society. This is his basis of classification of society into ruling and oppressed class. The relationship between these two classes are basically antagonistic and these antagonistic relationship lead to the conflict and finally to the change of the historical periods.

Marx identifies two components of the mode of production; the forces of production and relations of production. Forces of production are the technical component of production, which involves the technology, raw materials, and scientific knowledge employed in the process of production, the technical organisation of the production process and the labour power of the labourers. The forces of production in each of the historical epoch will correspond to particular relationships of production. The relations of production are the social relationships, which individuals enter into in order to produce goods (for example, in feudal society relations of production involves the relationship between the lord and vassal and the sets of rights, duties and obligations which make up that relationship). Marx argues in each of the historical epochs the essential structure of the society is shaped on the economy - the mode of production, which includes the forces of production and the relations of production and their relation to different classes in the society. These together form the base structure or the infrastructure of the society and the everything else in the society - the major institutions, value and belief systems, which make into the super structure of the society - are seen as shaped by the economic infrastructure of the society.

In all historical societies there are basic contradictions between the forces and relations of production and there are fundamental conflicts of interests between the social groups involved in the production process. The relationship between the major social groups is one of exploitation and oppression. Marx argues in all the historical societies with a possible exception of prehistoric society, there exists a basic contradiction; contradiction of the social groups of those who exploit and those who are exploited. For example, in feudal society the contradiction between lords - the exploiter group and the serfs - the exploited group. He believed the contradictions cannot survive in the existing form for long as it creates fundamental conflict of interest between social groups since one gains at the expense of others. This conflict of interests ultimately resolved bringing about a major social change to form the next historical period.

The superstructure in all historical societies derives largely from the infrastructure and therefore reproduces the relations of production, thus reflecting the interests of the dominant group in the relations of production. Marx refers the dominant ideas of each historical epoch as the ruling class ideology. He argues that the ruling class ideology distorts the true nature of society and serves to legitimate and justify the *status quo*. However, the contradictions in the infrastructure will eventually lead to a disintegration of the system and the creation of the new society. The ultimate society Marx talks about is the socialist communist society where all will be equal having same relationship to the forces of production and hence no contradiction.

### Reflection and Action 5.1

How will you place religion in the overall social theory of Karl Marx?

After having seen Marxian theory very briefly, let us turn to the Marxian notion of religion.

## 5.3 Marxian Notion of Religion

According to Karl Marx, religion is like any other social institutions in that it is dependent upon the material and economic realities in a given society. So also religion can only be understood in relation to other social systems and the economic structures of society since it is a creature of productive forces. For him the religious world is but the reflex of the real world. His interpretation of religion thus can be said as functional because he is concerned with the social purpose of religion and not on the religious doctrine or the religious beliefs as such (Wilson 1982).

### Box 5.1: Functionalist Interpretation of Religion

The functionalists explain any phenomena in terms of its role for the survival of the society as a whole. In terms of religion their analysis is primarily concerned with the contribution of religion makes to meet the functional prerequisites or basic needs of the society. From this perspective society needs a certain degree of social solidarity, value consensus, and harmony and integration between its parts. The function of the religion is the contribution it makes to meet such functional prerequisites, for example, its contribution to social solidarity.

**Source:** Haralambos, M. 1981.

In Marx's opinion religion is an illusion that provides reasons and excuses to keep society functioning just as it is. For him religion is irrational, alienating and hypocritical. Religion is irrational because it is a delusion and a worship of appearances that avoids recognizing underlying reality. It alienates people from their highest ideals and aspirations and projects them to an alien and unknowable being called God. It negates all that is dignified in a human being by rendering them servile and more amenable to accepting the *status quo*; the state of being oppressed. It is hypocritical in the sense that though it professes valuable principles, it sides with the oppressors. 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 (Bottomore 1979).

### Box 5.2: Marx's Comments on Religion

Marx' best-known comment on religion, comes from the "Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*: Introduction". It is as follows:

Religion is [the world's] general basis for consolation...The struggle against religion is...a struggle against that world whose spiritual aroma is religion. Religious suffering is at the same time an expression of real suffering and a protest against real suffering. Religious distress is at the same time the expression of real distress and the protest against real distress. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, just as it is the spirit of a spiritless situation. It is the opium of the people. The abolition of religion as the illusory happiness of the people is required for their real happiness. The demand to give up the illusion about its condition is the demand to give up a condition, which needs illusions. (Source: Tucker 1978).

Marx believed the abolition of religion, as the illusory happiness of the people is required for their real happiness. And the demand to give up the illusion about its condition is the demand to give up a condition, which needs illusions. How religion acts as illusion and what is the social condition that needs this illusion?

Marx says that religion is meant to create illusory fantasies for the poor. The poor are dominated and ruled by the ruling class, which owns the forces of production. The economic realities that keep them suppressed prevent them from finding true happiness in this life. So religion gives them the illusion that this is correct or true because they will find true happiness in the next life. In the existing social system the people are in distress and religion does provide solace. Thus Marx says religion masks the actual social reality, provide them temporary relief, just as people who are physically injured receive relief from opiate-based drugs. Here Marx compares religion to opium - a sedative substance (Pals, D.L. 1996).

A sedative only helps to forget the pain for the time being, it fails to fix a physical injury. The pain could be healed only if one solves the underlying causes of the pain. Similarly, religion does not fix the underlying causes of people's pain and suffering – instead, it helps them forget why they are suffering and causes them to look forward to an imaginary future and accepts the social system in its existing form. It thus prevents working to change circumstances. The worse is as Marx puts it that the "opiate drug" i.e., religion is administered by the oppressors who are responsible for the pain and suffering or the actual oppression.

### Reflection and Action 5.2

Do you agree with the Marxian view that religion masks social reality? Explain with the help of religious doctrines that you know best.

For Marx religion is an expression of more fundamental unhappiness and symptom of more fundamental and oppressive economic realities. He hopes humans will create a society in which the economic conditions causing so much pain and suffering would be eradicated and, therefore, the need for soothing drugs like religion will cease. To put in other words, what Marx expects is that in the ultimate society of socialist communism there will be no oppression of one group by other and hence there is no need for an illusory happiness and there ceases the requirement of any religious dogmas.

Marx believes that any religious beliefs survive in the society so long as people are not aware of their interests. People are not aware that religion serves the interests of the ruling classes. This is because people are socialised into believing that what they know is the truth. Marx proposes that religion internalises in people a set of beliefs that are contrary to their interest but are in the interest of the ruling class. In the Communist Manifesto, Marx suggests that religion, like morality and philosophy, must be eliminated if we are to achieve a new political and economic existence. "Communism," he and Engels write, "abolishes all religion, and all morality, instead of constituting them on new basis" (1968). The reason for this is the historical evidence that regardless of previous changes in the productive systems, religion has always supported the maintenance of the legitimacy of the exploiter and exploited. Thus, to create a truly free society, religion as a tie to the past must be eliminated.

So we have seen religion act as an illusion masks the social reality and perpetuates social injustice. How does religion masks the social reality of oppression and exploitation of one class by the other class? This is mainly done through the internalisation of religious preaching. Let us see more on this in the following section.

## 5.4 Religion - an Instrument of Oppression

Religion in Marx's opinion soothes the pains of oppression as well as act as an instrument of oppression. It dulls the pain of oppression, for example, in Christianity, by promising a paradise of eternal bliss in life after death. The appeal of Christianity to the oppressed classes lies in its promise of salvation from the bondage and misery in the after life. The Christian vision of heaven can make life on earth more bearable by giving people something to look forward. Religions also make a virtue of the sufferings produced by oppression. They preach that those who bear the deprivations of poverty with dignity and humility will be rewarded for their virtue in afterlife, in a way making poverty more bearable. Another way of religion to appease oppression is the offer of supernatural intervention to solve the problems on earth. Members of religious groups such as Jehovah's Witness live in anticipation of the day when the supernatural powers will descend form on high and create heaven on earth (Haralombos 1981) anticipation of this future can make the present more acceptable. Thus religion often justifies the social order as well as the oppressed state of the people within it. It perpetuates the inevitability of the social arrangements and social stratification by pronouncing that the poverty and misfortune are divinely ordained as punishment for sin.

Religion not only legitimizes oppression, according to Marx, but also acts as an instrument of that oppression. It acts as a mechanism of social control, maintaining the existing social system of exploitation on reinforcing the class relationships. It also discourages people from attempting to change their life by justifying their miseries in this worldly life. It offers an illusion of hope in the hopeless situation and it prevents the thoughts of overthrowing the system. It distorts reality and produce false consciousness, which blinds the members of the oppressed class to their true situation and their real interests. In this way it diverts attention from the real source of their oppression and so helps to maintain ruling class power (*Ibid*).

How religion operates as an instrument of oppression in any society?

Religion operates in any given society both as a dominant ideology and superstructure. Let us see these aspects in the following section.

## 5.5 The Dominant Ideology - Religion

In *German Ideology* Marx regarded ideologies as systems of misleading or illusionary ideas. He distinguishes between ideology, which is illusionary and non-verifiable, from science, which is real and verifiable. For him ideology is a process accomplished by an individual consciously with a false consciousness. He considered ideology as a negative and restricted concept. It is negative because it involves distortion, a misrepresentation of contradictions. It is restricted because it does not cover all kinds of errors and distortions. In his conception of religion as misrepresented ideas of social reality Marx was highly influenced by the religious conceptions of Feuerbach (Bottomore 1981).

### Box 5.3: Ludwig Andreas Feuerbach

Ludwig Andreas Feuerbach was a German philosopher who was influenced by Hegel and who himself influenced the work of Marx and Engels. He critiqued religion and Christianity in his 1841 book *Das Wesen des Christentums (The Essence of Christianity)*. Feuerbach defined religion as a sort of “dream” and argued that “spiritual development” was more about humans than about gods. Basically, his argument was that belief in gods is a product of anthropomorphism because humans project their own ideals and images upon nature. Feuerbach is well known as the author of *The Essence of Christianity*, first published in German in 1841 and *Lectures on the Essence of Religion* (1848). For him religion is a symbolic representation of man and that to eliminate human self-alienation religion has to be demystified and placed upon rational level.

Some key phrases from *Essence of Christianity* that express Feuerbach’s thesis:

“God is man, man is God”.

“Atheism is the secret of religion”.

“Religion itself, not indeed on the surface, but fundamentally, not in intention or according to its own supposition, but in its heart, in its essence, believes in nothing else than the truth and divinity of human nature.”

“Religion takes the apparent, the superficial in Nature and humanity for the essential, and hence conceives their true essence as a separate, special existence.”

“Religion is the dream of the human mind...in these days, illusion only is sacred, truth profane.”

Source: Harvey 1997.

#### a) Influence of Feuerbach on Karl Marx

Marx owes his philosophical awakening to Feuerbach. Two of Feuerbach’s important works on religion are *The Essence of Christianity* and *Lectures on the Essence of Religion*. The central thought in *The Essence of Christianity* is that the superhuman deities of religion are actually the involuntary projections of the essential attributes of human nature. In Feuerbach’s own words: “Man projects his being into objectivity, and then again makes himself an object to this projected image of himself thus converted into a subject”. What the devout mind worships as God is accordingly nothing but the idea of the human species imagined as a

perfect individual. Once they are unmasked, shown for what they really are, religious belief and the idea of God can be useful instruments of human self-understanding, revealing to us our essential nature and worth. But taken at face value, they are alienating insofar as they betray us into placing our own possibilities outside of us as attributes of God and not of humanity, viewing ourselves as unworthy objects of a projected image of our own essential nature. Theology, as Feuerbach sees it, only reinforces the state of alienation by taking the objectifications of religion for real objects, and the theologians end up with dogmas that are self-contradictory and absurd (Harvey 1997).

In his *The Essence of Religion* he locates the subjective source of religion in human dependence on nature. The forces of nature on which our existence wholly depends are made less mysterious and more pliable by our perceiving them as personal beings like ourselves. "Nature, in reality, is not a personal being; it has no heart, it is blind and deaf to the desires and complaints of man". In short, religion is superstition, and science must eventually supplant it.

Marx was influenced by the arguments of Feuerbach, such as:

- humans make religion in their own image;
- they cling to religion so long as they feel the continued need to project themselves onto the universe, so long as they love the illusion of their dreams more than the reality of the waking world;
- one of the signs of human maturity is the self-conscious attempt to overcome human self-alienation, to be conscious of the projective impulse that gives rise to religion, and then to leave religion, as such, behind.

Thus the basic tenet of Feuerbach is that man makes religion and that the idea that God makes man is an inversion. Marx agreed with Feuerbach in that the religious and metaphysical ideas convey false views of the world and these false views arise from the aims and desires of man and from the social arrangements, which prevent these aims and desires from being realised. Feuerbach thought that once this was clearly recognised people would free themselves from their obsession with another world, and would endeavour all the more strongly to realise love, justice, goodness and wisdom in the human world. For Marx too religious conceptions are inversions that conceal the reality.

But Marx also pushes further than Feuerbach to give a precise analysis of human self-alienation, of the reasons why humans get involved in clinging to an illusory world of projections in the first place. For him humans and their self-alienation have to be understood in concrete social, political terms. According to Marx the idea that God makes man is more than a philosophical alienation or mere illusion. It expresses the contradictions and sufferings of the real world. For him the state and the society produce religion, which is an inverted consciousness of the world because they are an inverted world (*Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right: Introduction*). The religious inversion compensates in the mind for a deficient reality; it reconstitutes in the imagination a coherent solution, which is beyond the real world in order to make up for the contradictions of the real world.

### Reflection and Action 5.3

Why did Marx consider religious conceptions as inverted ideas?

Marx later calls these inverted ideas as ideology (in *German Ideology*), something that starts from consciousness instead of material reality (Bottomore 1979). According to him the real problems of the humanity are not mistaken ideas but real social contradictions and that these mistaken ideas or ideology are actually the consequences of the social contradictions. And Marx argues that due to the limited material mode of activity the human beings are unable to solve the social contradictions in practice and hence they tend to project them in ideological forms of consciousness, which is to say, purely mental or discursive solutions which effectively conceal or misrepresent the existence and characteristic of these contradictions. Thus the religious ideology conceals the social contradictions and contributes to their reproduction and serves the interests of the ruling class. The ideological distortions manifested in the religious ideas cannot be overcome by criticism; they can disappear only when the contradictions, which give rise to them, are practically resolved.

Marx is therefore a fierce critic of religion, though he is aiming not primarily at religion as a cause of the problem, but only as a symptom that, once present, becomes part of the corrupt socio-political order and only perpetuates the very problem it professes to solve. He says "The abolition of religion as the illusory happiness of the people is required for real happiness. The demand to give up the illusions about its condition is the demand to give up a condition that needs illusions...Thus the criticism of heaven turns into the criticism of earth...the criticism of theology into the criticism of politics". (Giddens).

#### **Box 5.4: Shift in the Conception of Ideology in Marxism (from Negative to Positive connotation)**

Soon after Marx' death the concept of ideology began to acquire new meanings. The new meanings took two main forms: conception of ideology as the totality of forms of social consciousness, which came to be expressed by the concept of ideological superstructure; and the conception of ideology as the political ideas connected with the interests of class. These new meanings finally displaced the original negative connotation of the concept of ideology. The thinkers after Marx even called Marxism as an ideology. With Lenin the process of change in the meaning of ideology reaches in its culmination. For him ideology is the political consciousness linked to the interests of various classes and in particular he focuses on the opposition between bourgeois and the socialist ideology. Thus for him ideology is not a distortion which conceals contradictions but becomes a neutral concept referring to the political consciousness of classes, including the proletarian class.

#### **a) The Origin of Religious Ideology**

In *German Ideology* criticizing Feurbach (for whom religion is just an illusion) explains the social and political origin of religious ideology. For Marx humanity or man is not uniform at all times of societal development. There are different sorts of 'men' existed at different times and places. Men for him are social beings whose nature changes with the sort of life they lead. The sort of life they lead changes according to the way in which they get their living, according to the tools and organisations of labour they employ to get food and shelter and to satisfy their other needs. With the development of human society division of labour appears among men and between men and work. The division of labour leads to class divisions and at different times different classes have dominated human societies in accordance with whatever was the predominant mode



of production. One class will dominate in every society depending on the mode of production and nature of division of labour. When division takes place in the dominant class there forms a sub class who specialise in production of ideas. Since these ideas are produced from within the dominant class, they will be imposed upon the whole society. They will in fact be the expression of the needs and aspirations of the dominant class although they will seem to those who frame them and many others to be of universal significance. Religious ideas (also other ideas like legal, political, artistic, philosophical etc.) are produced in the society in such way by specialists at the behest of a given class or within the framework of a given historical epoch and these ideas reproduce a false consciousness of things. Thus religion originates as a dominant ideology in any particular historical epoch gives the distorted views of the world as reality. (Aron 1965).

## 5.6 Religion as Super Structure

For Marx economy is the foundation of the whole socio-cultural system. The economic system of production and distribution or the means and relations of production in the Marxian sense constitute the basic structure of society. The production of immediate material means of subsistence and the consequent degree of economic development form the foundation upon which other institutions such as state, legal conceptions, aesthetic and religious ideas of the people concerned are developed. Hence for Marx like all other factors in the human experience, the foundation of religion too is dependent upon the economic factor.

Marx viewed religion as one facet of that whole which he calls the superstructure and that is based on and affected by the infrastructure. The shift in the historical epochs along with the change in the economic infrastructure there occurs transformation of the superstructure. So differences in religion occur with changes in the infrastructure. He proposed that earlier (pre-capitalist) religious beliefs arose from primitive man's helplessness in his struggle against nature, while in the class society it is rooted in his struggle against man. In man's quest and struggle against his exploiters, the working masses experience a different form of helplessness – and this experience is what changed religion and introduced the belief in a better life in a hereafter, the alleged reward for his earthly suffering.

Marx adds all the facets of superstructure such as religion, state, political, legal philosophical and artistic react upon one another as well as upon the economic base. Thus, it is not the economic situation is the sole active cause. The reciprocity among and between the economic institutions act as cause of change, though economic necessity always asserts itself. For him the human thought, human awareness and human consciousness were not self-originating but are derivatives of economic principle. And it is in this arena that the religions must be controlled and human consciousness brought under dominance. In that sense religion must be understood in terms of the conditions that produced (and produce) it.

## 5.7 Marx on 'Jewish Question'

Marx was a Jew by birth and later converted to Protestantism. He was critical of both Christianity and Judaism though his hostility to Christianity was mild compared to Judaism. Most of his religious interpretations were based on the religion of Christianity. He also did study Judaism, which gave him an opportunity to consider the role of a religion (other than

Christianity) in society. His hostile view of Jews and Judaism is expressed in 1843 under the title "On the Jewish Question" (Marx 1977). This essay is Marx's criticism of Bruno Bauer's study on the emancipation of Jews in Germany. This essay is among Marx's "pre-Marxist" writings since he wrote it before becoming a communist. Bauer took the position that the achievement of Jewish emancipation in Prussia could not occur until Jews had renounced their identity as a separate people. And Bauer also argued that it was not possible to grant emancipation to the Jews when Christians themselves were not free.

Marx criticised Bauer's stance, citing among other things the experience of the United States whose Bill of Rights and many of its state constitutions had established separation between church and state of state neutrality between religious faiths. For Marx, religion is a private matter and the state had no right to intervene other than on issues concerning the individual as citizen. Marx argued that the political emancipation of the Jews in Prussia would not require that the Jews give up their identity as a separate group or people. However, Marx then drew a distinction between political emancipation and human emancipation. Political emancipation for Marx meant the achieving of political rights under the bourgeois state.

Marx argued that this sort of emancipation was insufficient since these sort of rights were linked to egoism and private property. The sort of liberty that was possible under the bourgeois state was not to be equated with a genuine human emancipation which in his view required the transcendence of what he at the time called commercial society. For Marx whereas the achievement of political emancipation required that Jews be granted equal civil rights with Gentiles, human emancipation required the abolition of the distinction between Jews and Gentiles as a social distinction, which was rooted in commercial society (what he later called capitalism).

Marx in "On the Jewish Question" went to provide such a social analysis focusing on the material roots for the existence of a Jewish minority within Christian Europe. For Marx this material basis lied within the fact that Jews were disproportionately concentrated in trade and commerce, which gave them real economic and political power out of proportion to their actual numbers. This economic power made it possible for the Jews to press the demand for civil equality and to infiltrate their social and commercial values into civil society. The state in turn was dependent upon the Jews for its own financial integrity and so it required that the Jews perform their functions within the world of commerce. Thus civil society in Marx's view provided the material basis for the existence of the Jews as a separate group or caste, which needed them as traders, huckster, and moneylenders. Therefore, the Jews would not disappear until either they abandoned their roles as traders and hucksters or the state itself liberated itself from the need for commercialism.

## 5.8 Criticisms to Marxian Approach to the Study of Religion

Marxian theory of religion is not without criticisms. Let us see some of them here.

Marx draws most of his religious interpretations from the study of Christianity, the religion he was most familiar with. He is not taking into consideration the religions in general although his comments do hold for other religions with similar doctrines of a powerful god and happy afterlife; they do not apply to radically different religions. It is possible to say that

in this matter he was influenced by Hegel, who thought that Christianity was the highest form of religion and that whatever was said about that also automatically applied to “lesser” religions – but that isn’t true.

Another flaw of this theory is that he argues religion is wholly determined by material and economic realities. Not only is nothing else fundamental enough to influence religion, but also influence cannot run in the other direction, from religion to material and economic realities. This also proved to be false because if Marx were right, then capitalism would appear in countries prior to Protestantism because Protestantism is the religious system created by capitalism – but we don’t find this. The Reformation comes to 16th century Germany, which is still feudal in nature; real capitalism doesn’t appear until the 19th century. This caused Max Weber to theorize that religious institutions end up creating new economic realities.

Some argue with evidence that Marxian propositions about the role of religion in the society must be limited to the operation of religion at certain times and in certain places. So also one shall not restrict to the idea that religion is only dependent upon economics and nothing else, such that the actual doctrines of religions are almost irrelevant. Instead, we can recognise that there are a variety of social influences upon religion, including economic and material realities of society. By the same token, religion can in turn have an influence upon society’s economic system.

The contemporary period witnessed the breaking down of the communist society that Marx talks about. It is also true that religion never disappeared in the Marx’s communist utopia.

In spite of a number of problems with his ideology and personality, Marx’s theory of society and of religion, while in many ways controversial, has nonetheless provided great insight into the functioning of society. Whatever one’s final conclusion about the accuracy or validity of Marx’s ideas on religion, we should recognise that he provided an invaluable service by forcing people to take a hard look at the social web in which religion always occurs. Because of his work, it has become impossible to study religion without also exploring its ties to various social and economic forces. Even for those who find it difficult to accept his political views, his social theory based on the interaction between the social infrastructure and superstructure has been and continues to be an important departing point for the sociological approach to the study of society and religion.

## 5.9 Conclusion

The present unit looks into the Marxian interpretation of religion. His conception on religion cannot be seen in isolation, it has to be placed in the context of his entire theory of historical materialism and economic determinism. He viewed religion in terms of its social purpose. For him the primordial factor of analysis of the society is economic. And all other aspects are generated from and the manifestations of the economic aspects of the society. Religion is also no different; because for him it is emanated due to the economic necessity of all forms of society. He believed the ruling class are the creators and perpetuators of the religious notions and it manifest in the society as the dominant ideology, which is inverted reality. Religion is inversion of reality since it functions towards maintaining social system of oppressors and oppressed by justifying it through religious teachings. But he believed these notions would continue till people’s consciousness continues to be ‘false consciousness’. He argued when oppressed people (proletariat) realise social reality, they work towards the change of the existing system and thereby historical epochs move

from one phase to other. The final stage is the socialist communist society, which will be a classless society according to Marx. Since there is no question of oppression in a classless society, there is no need of religion too.

The unit provides a brief account of Marx' social theory so as to conceptualise his religious notions. Then it discusses his religious conceptualisations and his explanation on how religious notions operates in different societies. Marx's ideas on Judaism also been briefly discussed in the unit. The last section of the unit deals with the criticisms of Marxian theory of religion.

## 5.10 Further Reading

Marx, K. and F. Engels, 1975. *On Religion*. Progress Publishers: Moscow.

Bottomore, T., 1979 (ed.) *Karl Marx*. Basil Publishers: Oxford.

Giddens, Antony, 1992. *Capitalism and Modern Social Theory: An Analysis of the Writings of Marx, Durkheim and Max Weber*. Cambridge University Press Cambridge.

## References

Aron, Raymond, 1965. *Main Currents in Sociological Thought*. Vol. 1. Penguin Books: London.

Abercombie, N. et al. 1980. *The Dominant Ideology Thesis*. Allen & Unwin: London.

Feuer, L. S., 1969. *Marx and the Intellectuals*. Doubleday: Garden City, N.Y.

Mannheim, K. 1936. *Ideology and Utopia*. Harcourt: New York.

Marx, K. 1977. "On the Jewish Question," in D. McLellan ed. *Karl Marx*. Oxford University Press: Oxford.

Marx, K. and F. Engels, 1968. "Manifesto of the Communist Party" in *Selected Works* Progress Publishers: Moscow.

Marx, K. and F. Engels, 1976. *The German Ideology*, Progress Publishers: Moscow.

Harvey, Van A. 1997, *Feuerbach and the Interpretation of Religion*. Cambridge University Press: Cambridge.

Andrew, Collier 2001 *Christianity and Marxism: A Philosophical Contribution to Their Reconciliation*. Routledge: London.

Tucker, R. ed. 1978. *The Marx-Engels Reader* WW Norton: New York.

Wilson Bryan 1982. *Religion in Sociological Perspective*. Oxford University Press: Oxford.

Plas, D.L. 1996. *Seven Theories of Religion*. Oxford University Press: Oxford

Herbert Aptheker ed. 1968. *Marxian Christianity*. Humanities Press: New York.

Bottomore, T.B. 1963. *Karl Marx, Early Writings*. (translated) C.A. Wats and Co.: London