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Farman Ali[1]
Saeed Akhtar[2]
Muhammad Hussain[3]
Imtiaz Ahmad[4]
Adnan Khan[5*]

Understanding the Role of Religion: Analyzing Durkheim, Marx and Islamic Perspectives

Farman Ali
Assistant Professor, Department of Social Work, University of Malakand.
Email:farman.ali@uom.edu.pk
Saeed Akhtar
Lecturer, Department of Islamic Studies and Religious Affairs, University of Malakand
Muhammad Hussain
Lecturer, Department of Sociology, University of Malakand
Imtiaz Ahmad
Assistant Professor, Department of Journalism and Mass Communication, University of Malakand
Adnan Khan*
Assistant Professor, Department of Sociology, University of Malakand.
Corresponding Author Email: akhan@uom.edu.pk

Abstract

This study examines the role of religion in society by analyzing the perspectives of Émile Durkheim and Karl Marx, juxtaposing them with the Islamic viewpoint. The study uses an analytical approach and examines the theories of Durkheim and Marx while drawing on the Holy Quran, Hadith and Seerah to illustrate how Islam contributes to the discussion of religion and society. Durkheim and Marx analyzed religion in the context of societal transformations and their theories laid the foundation for further debates in social sciences and religious studies. The study concludes that the Islamic perspective on religion aligns neither fully with Durkheim's functionalist view nor with Marx's critique of religion as an opiate of the masses. Islam, however, takes a middle ground by recognizing religion as a means of social cohesion and a catalyst for social transformation.

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INTRODUCTION

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Religion has always been a fundamental aspect of communal life, shaping people's experiences across the globe. Throughout history, wars, massacres and treaties have been justified or negotiated in its name. On one hand, religion is regarded as a source of salvation and stability; on the other hand, atheists view it as an illusion and attribute many contemporary issues, including war, terrorism, and hatred to its influence.

Given the significance of religion in antiquity, the medieval period and modern societies, this study draws on the theoretical perspectives of Émile Durkheim and Karl Marx, two classical theorists whose work laid the foundation of the social science for understanding religion and its function in society. This study attempts to contextualize the theoretical ideas of these two theorists in light of Islamic teachings and explores how the Islamic perspective differs regarding the function of religion in society.

Émile Durkheim and Karl Marx have contrasting notions about the role of religion in society, while Islam presents a different paradigm and maintains that religion has the dual function of obtaining spiritual fulfillment and promoting social justice. In other words, Islam seeks to incorporate the positive ideas from both perspectives and, by means of that, seeks to ensure both moral and social well-being in society. Durkheim, as discussed earlier, argues that religion is a unifying force that fosters collective consciousness. Islamic teachings on the importance of unity also show that it aims to use religion to create social cohesion. As far as Karl Marx's perspective is concerned, Islam contradicts it in some ways and prescribes to it in many ways. For instance, Karl Marx regards religion as the opiate of the masses, whereas Islam considers religion as the catalyst of resistance against corrupt and tyrannical political and social orders.

Émile Durkheim (1858-1917) is considered an important theorist and a forerunner of modern functionalism. Robert Merton acknowledges that he learned the most from Durkheim (Wallace & Wolf, 1995). Karl Marx (1818-1883) is a complex theorist whose work requires serious study to fully understand. His ideas have produced a significant and productive program in the field of sociology (Ritzer & Stepnisky, 2018) and economics. Marx has offered fresh perspectives on globalization, alienation, and the environment (Foster, 2000).

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative approach, analyzing existing literature on Marx and Durkheim's theories of religion and contextualizing them in light of the Islamic perspective. Secondary data has been critically examined and analyzed to contribute to scholarly discussion. Using an analytical approach, this study examines the views of Marx and Durkheim on religion while also drawing on the Holy Quran, Hadith, and Seerah to demonstrate how Islam interprets religion and its function.

DURKHEIM AND MARX ON RELIGION

Émile Durkheim and Karl Marx lived during an era when the West was undergoing the Industrial Revolution. They witnessed the transformation of society from feudalism to capitalism and were deeply concerned with this transitional period. These two classical theorists are significant in the sociological study of religion because they provided the foundation for further debates and sociological discussions (Alexander, 1987). Their work established a conceptual vocabulary and inspired many contemporary methods of analysis (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 30).

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Durkheim and Marx have had a profound influence on sociology. However, unlike Durkheim, Marx does not have a significant following within the sociological discussion of religion. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that Marx's influence remains substantial, and some aspects of his work are still being explored (McKinnon, 2010). Marx, like Durkheim, shares a structural perspective on the role of religion in society. He argues that "Man can be distinguished from animals by consciousness, by religion, or anything else you like" (Marx, 1987, p. 18). This statement suggests that religion plays a role in society and that people consciously engage in religious practices. However, unlike Durkheim, Marx views religion as an illusion that provides the oppressed with a false sense of satisfaction that distracts them from the realities of their exploitation (Marx, 1844). To Marx, this illusionary state perpetuates false consciousness that prevents individuals from recognizing their true purpose of revolution, which he sees as the ultimate solution for the oppressed (Marx, 1843). In contrast, Durkheim sees religion as serving the function of social solidarity. He conceptualizes religion in terms of the sacred and the profane. The sacred evokes fear, awe and reverence, but it can be both dangerous and beneficial. It distinguishes itself from the profane through specific taboos (Durkheim, 1912).

Marx argues that the modern state emancipated the Jews rather than emancipating itself from the constraints of religion, thereby granting recognition to no particular religion. This enabled the Jews to compete on an equal footing with everyone else (Marx, 1987). For Marx, religion is a subjective and temporary relief that diverts the masses from real emancipation freedom from oppression and exploitation and from realizing their true human potential (Ritzer & Spinks, 2018; Karlsson & Mason, 2017). He considers religion to be the most extreme and archetypal form of alienation (Stromberg, 1979). Furthermore, Marx views religion as a manifestation of false consciousness (Marx, 1975), though he extends the concept of false consciousness beyond religion (Stromberg, 1979). Under the influence of religion, death, poverty, and inequality become bearable, as individuals find consolation in their own creation of religion and God.

In contrast, Durkheim views religion as a symbolic system of society that expresses and maintains the values and sentiments of people living in various groups within their communal life. Unlike Marx, Durkheim sees religion as vital to society, identified Totemism as the elementary form of religion (Durkheim, 1912). According to Durkheim, a totem is a sacred object that serves as a marker for a social group. Through this mechanism, beliefs and rituals strengthen group solidarity and cohesiveness while reinforcing societal sentiments (Durkheim, 1912). Rituals, according to Durkheim, are key to the creation of knowledge and thought. Through chanting, dancing, and other communal celebrations, individual identity dissolves into the group, fostering collective passion (Lincoln & Guillot, 2004). A religious individual not only interprets the world in a specific way but also experiences within themselves an extraordinary and powerful force that dominates them, elevating them beyond their ordinary self providing them with energy and strength to face life's problems and challenges (Durkheim, 1912). However, Marx rejects such functions of religion in his envisioned future society of communism.

According to Durkheim, when an individual or group worships God, they are, in essence, worshiping their own society. God is created through the collective experiences of a group, and in return, this creation reinforces group solidarity (Durkheim, 1912). In contrast, Marx was neither interested in nor influenced by this

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idea. He saw religion as an obstacle to the development of class consciousness. He famously summarized this perspective with his well-known statement: "Religion is the moan of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, the sense of senseless conditions; it is the opium of the people" (Marx, 1969, p. 42).

Marx used the term "opium" metaphorically, but its precise meaning remains debated, given that opium at the time was used in different contexts as a painkiller, as a source of euphoria, and in warfare (e.g., the Opium Wars) (McKinnon, 2010). According to Marx, capitalism utilizes religion as a tool to maintain the status quo and perpetuate alienation. Alienation, in the context of religion, refers to the condition in which individuals become controlled by the forces of their own creation, which then confront them as an alien power (Coser, 2003). Christianity, for instance, commands its followers to believe that those who are wealthy and powerful in this world will not be rewarded in the afterlife, whereas the poor and oppressed will be compensated after death due to their spiritual devotion. Thus, they will receive their rewards in the Kingdom of God (Marx, 1987). Furthermore, Marx is widely regarded as one of the most influential atheists of all time because he believed that religion played a role in upholding capitalism, which exploits it as a tool to maintain the status quo of oppression (Koster, 1989). However, The Islamic perspective on religion is underpinned by distinct epistemological and theological foundation that is different from these classical theorists. The following section discusses Islamic perspective on Durkheim and Marx theory of religion.

ISLAMIC PERSPECTIVE ON DURKHEIM'S THEORY OF RELIGION

Islam, in many ways, agrees with Durkheim's assertion that religion is a source of unity and social cohesion. Islam also reinforces cohesion and solidarity through its rituals and practices, which show that Islam is in congruence with Durkheim's perspective on the unifying role of religion. The Holy Quran places great stress on the significance of unity in the following verse:

"And hold firmly to the rope of Allah all together and do not become divided" (Ibn Kathir, 2000).

Similarly, he argues that religion improves social bonds through rituals and sacred practices. In Islam, Salat (congregational prayer), fasting, and Hajj (pilgrimage) serve the function of creating social solidarity. The Prophet (peace be upon him) emphasized the importance of unity in the following hadith:

"The believers, in their mutual love, mercy, and compassion, are like a single body" (Muslim ibn al-Hajjaj, 2007).

Moreover, Durkheim creates a distinction between the sacred and the profane. Islam also makes such distinctions through its notions of halal and haram. The sanctity of places of worship, such as mosques and particularly the Kaaba, is comparable to his notions of the sacred and the profane. Islam urges people to treat places of worship with due respect, and in this regard, it does not draw any distinction between the worship places of Muslims and non-Muslims. The Holy Quran says:

"And were it not that Allah checks [the people], some by means of others, there would have been demolished monasteries, churches, synagogues, and mosques in which the name of Allah is much mentioned. And Allah will surely support those who support Him. Indeed, Allah is Powerful and Exalted in Might" (Ibn Kathir, 2000).

ISLAMIC PERSPECTIVE ON KARL MARX'S CRITIQUE OF RELIGION

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Marx views religion as the opium of the masses and argues that it prevents resistance on behalf of the oppressed masses against the tyrannical bourgeois class, which is at variance with the ideological position of Islam. Contrary to what Marx argues, Islam emphasizes the role of religion as a catalyst for social and political well-being.

While Marx argues that religion perpetuates and endorses class division, Islam strives for social equality. The Prophet (peace be upon him) condemned social pride and advocated the abolition of social injustice. He criticized such stratification in his last sermon:

"No Arab has superiority over a non-Arab, nor does a non-Arab have superiority over an Arab; a white has no superiority over a black, nor does a black have any superiority over a white, except by piety and good action (Ahmad ibn Hanbal, 1999).

Moreover, the Prophet (peace be upon him) struggled vigorously, focusing on the rights of the poor and the underprivileged. A cursory study his life reveals his genuine concern for social justice and the well-being of deprived communities. Abu Huraira (may Allah be pleased with him) narrated that Muhammad (peace be upon him) said:

"The one who strives to help the widows and the poor is like the one who fights in the way of Allah, or like the one who prays at night continuously and fasts during the day" (Al-Bukhar & Muhammad ibn Isma'il, 2007).

He always identified himself as a poor man, and to encourage poor people, he used to say: *"O Allah, grant me life as a poor person, cause me to die as a poor person, and resurrect me among the poor"* (Ahmad ibn Hanbal, 2001)

Marx maintains that the poor remain poor because of the opiate of religion, but contrary to what he theorized, the Prophet (peace be upon him) did not regard poverty as an ideal condition, as is evident from his saying: *"O Allah, I seek refuge in You from disbelief and poverty"* (Ahmad ibn Hanbal, 2001)

His mission guaranteed support for the poor, as he is reported to have said: *"He is not a believer whose stomach is filled while his neighbor goes hungry."* Likewise, he made it the duty of the Muslim ruler to feed the hungry and free the captives:

Another hadith narrated by Abu Huraira defines the best charity as:

"That which is given when you are healthy and greedy, hoping to be wealthy but fearing poverty. And do not delay it until death approaches you" (Al-Bukhari & Muhammad ibn Ismai'il, 2007).

Moreover, he strongly warned his followers against oppressing the weak. Abu Dharr narrated that the Prophet (peace be upon him) said:

"Allah has said: O My servants, I have forbidden oppression for Myself and have made it forbidden among you, so do not oppress one another" (Muslim ibn al-Hajjaj, 1999)

These and many other hadiths demonstrate that the mission of the Prophet (peace be upon him), far from being the opiate, was quite evidently a mission of uplifting the miserable condition of the poor and the underprivileged. It aimed at economic fairness, charity, and social justice.

The history of the Prophetic battles also shows that his battles were fought for social justice, not for power or material gain. His battles demonstrate that his religious message was not the *opiate of the masses* that pacified the oppressed or taught them to passively bear tyranny and oppression. The Prophet (peace be upon him) sacrificed

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his comfort and blood to liberate the oppressed from tyranny and injustice. It is an undeniable fact that his battles aimed at protecting the marginalized, the persecuted, such as the poor and slaves.

His battles directly contradict Marx's *opiate of the masses* theory, as he waged war not to empower tyrannical regimes but rather to challenge the unjust political and social order. Unlike mundane wars fought for economic benefits and territorial expansion, his battles were driven by the noble ideal of protecting the oppressed and persecuted. His message was not aimed at inculcating passive submission; rather, he taught his followers to rise and resist tyranny and exploitation.

CONLCUSION

From the above discussion, it can be concluded that both classical theorists viewed religion as a structural component of society that provides support to people. However, while Marx saw religion as a temporary illusion that offers relief under the patronage of capitalism, Durkheim regarded it as an essential social institution that binds people together. Both theorists not only analyzed religion within the context of a transforming society where social changes profoundly impacted people's lives but also laid the foundation for subsequent discussions in social sciences and religious studies. In addition, Islamic perspective on the role of religion neither completely agrees with Durkheim nor with Karl Marx. Rather, it takes an intermediate position between being a tool of social cohesion and the opiate of the masses. The nuanced Islamic perspective simultaneously emphasizes the role of religion as an advocate of social justice and cohesion and as a powerful force against tyranny and persecution.

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