

Revision Notes

Syllabus Section: Religion

Syllabus Area: Religion and Social Change (1)

Issue: Religion: class, age and gender

Introduction

In these Notes we can start to look in more detail at the relationship between a cultural institution such as religion and institutions such as work and government (economic and political institutions respectively). In specific terms, the syllabus asks us to look at the "role of religion as a conservative force and as an initiator of social change".

In this respect, there are three main points that we need to clarify before we can start to consider the role of religion.

a. Firstly, how do we define "social change"?

For example, for the past 200 years in Britain, Capitalism has been the main economic system (a Capitalist mode of production has been the dominant mode in this period). At this general, historical, level, nothing much has changed - people still work for each other, profits are still made, these profits are privately owned and so forth. Thus, in Marx's terms, it is debatable as to whether social change at the (economic) structural level of society has occurred...

On the other hand, it is clear that today's society - in terms of our day-to-day experiences - is radically different from that of 200, 100, or even 20 years ago. Vast technological and political changes have occurred in our society - yet the underlying economic rationale remains much the same...

Then again, if we delve further into the micro level of human social interaction, it is evident that change is all around us - no two days are ever exactly alike, no two experiences are ever exactly the same...In this sense, we live in a constantly-changing world that does, however, exhibit certain regularities and routines - we go to work, to school, we form relationships that have a certain degree of permanence and so forth.

What this basically means is that the term "social change" is by no-means as precise as we might believe and, for this reason, we must recognise that different writers may have different assumptions about what it involves. For the purpose of these Notes, however, I am assuming that by social change is meant major structural changes in the organization of any society. Although this assumption may be open to many challenges, it does allow us to look at the role of religion in a manageable way.

b. Secondly, what is meant by - and how do we define - a "conservative social force"?

There are two basic ideas involved here:

Firstly, we can define "conservative" in the sense of "preventing social change" and hence maintaining the status quo. We might note that this is probably closer to the Durkheimian view of "conservatism".

Secondly, however, we can define "conservatism" in terms of the assertion (or reassertion) of "traditional values and beliefs". In this respect, social change can occur, but what it probably involves is a reactionary (that is, "backward looking") change, rather than a revolutionary form of change. In this respect, whilst a society will change in a major way, such change will involve the attempt to impose a way of life that may have existed in the past. That is, this kind of change involves the attempt to recreate a way of life based upon traditional values and morality that may well have fallen into disuse. In this respect, social change is conservative and the two ideas are not opposed to one another.

Again, as should be clear, the way in which we choose to define this idea will have significant consequences for our ideas about the role of religion as a force for social change...

1. Why do you think it might be necessary to define the concept of "social change"?

c. Finally, having defined the ideas of social change and conservation, we need to examine the role of religion as an initiator of social change. This, as you might expect, will provide the major focus of our attention in this Study Pack.

This is important since, even if we establish that religion is not necessarily a conservative social force, it doesn't automatically follow that religion alone will be able to promote and sustain long-term changes in the organization of society.

To begin our examine of the role of religion in earnest, we can start by looking briefly at a review of the way in which classical sociologists have viewed religion. If you feel comfortable with these ideas (which were outlined in greater detail in the "Theories of Religion" Notes), feel free to move on to the main topic of these Notes. Alternatively, this review might prove to be a useful basis for your revision...

The theories we have examined in earlier Notes have tended to emphasize religion as a conservative social force that serves to legitimise, maintain and reproduce the status quo in any society:

From a Functionalist perspective, for example, Durkheim has argued that two of the main functions of religion are those of promoting social solidarity and encouraging social integration. In these terms, religion can, almost by definition, only be considered as a conservative social force.

From a Marxist perspective, religion is once again considered to be a conservative social force since, for Marxists, it represents a means of ideologically justifying the social world. From this perspective, religion is a means of social control and, therefore, a conservative force that can be used to justify the economic and political status quo. One of the major differences between the Structuralist perspectives of Functionalism and Marxism is that while the former tends to see the functions of religion in terms of the benefits it brings to society as a whole, Marxists tend to see religious ideas benefiting a ruling class.

From an Interactionist perspective (albeit a politically Conservative one) Berger sees religion as an ideological framework that seeks to explain "the world as it is". In this respect, religion is again, almost by definition, a conservative social force since its purpose is to enable people to make sense of the world around them.

2. For each of Durkheim, Marx and Berger, give one example of the way in which religion is seen as a form of social control, rather than as a force for social change:

In the following sections, I want to do two main things:

1. Firstly, I want to outline the way in which two different writers (Marx and Weber) - writing about the emergence of Capitalism in the 16th / 17th century - came to two different conclusions in relation to the role of religion and the immense social changes heralded by the development of Capitalism. This "debate" can be used to demonstrate the way in which religious ideas can be seen as either a conservative or radical social force. The emphasis here is on the concept of religion.

We know that, empirically, there is a correlation between religion and social change (in recent times, for example, we have seen the role of religious ideas and organizations in countries such as Iran, Poland and the old Soviet Union). However, what we need to understand sociologically is:

- a. Whether or not religion is a cause of social change or
- b. Whether it is a channel through which social change (which may or may not be religious in origin) is, at various times, directed.

For these reasons it is useful to look at the basic principles involved in this debate to see if we can establish / disentangle cause and effect relationships. We can, therefore, begin by looking at Marx's view of the relationship between religion and social change and then contrast this with Weber's analysis of the same topic.

2. Secondly, to conclude the Study Pack we can look at a more up-to-date form of analysis that focuses our attention upon the concept of social change and relegates the concept of religion to a secondary or dependent status. In this respect, we will look extensively at a number of New Religious Movements (sects and cults) around the world. This material will also be useful in terms of the work you have done on definitions of sects and cults, the secularisation debate and so forth.

Marx: Religion and Social Change.

When we looked at Marx's views in relation to religion, we saw that:

Religion is an ideological framework that can be adapted to the requirements of various powerful classes in society.

As an atheist, Marx's vigorous lack of belief in god(s) led him to emphasize the idea that people invent the existence of god(s) for explicitly social reasons.

In technologically-underdeveloped societies, for example, religion arises as a means of "explaining the unexplained". Religion, in such societies, is organized into ceremonies that involve strict hierarchical relationships between the various participants.

Over time, religious organization takes-on a momentum of its own:

In this respect, religious organization is separated from the "simple need to believe" (since this, of course, can be adequately satisfied, without the need for elaborate ceremonies, by individual's in "direct" personal contact with God(s)). Thus, according to Marx (in common with most sociologists):

If religion was only understandable in individual terms (the simple need to believe), there would be no social need for collective ceremonies and forms of worship.

Marx argued, therefore, that because religion is actually concerned with the dissemination of ideology and the exercising of power, the development of an explicitly social, organized, form of religious behaviour is inevitable - religion, by necessity, involves the development of classes of people who have a vested interest in the maintenance of belief systems for their status, prestige and so forth.

In this way, because belief systems are socially organized, they can be created and recreated as part of the powerful organization of knowledge in society and can, therefore, be directed towards the upholding of the status quo...

In the above, we can see that Marx was arguing a number of things:

1. That in order to understand the significance of religious beliefs and practices we need to analyse the ways in which a society is organized in terms of power relationships - and, since the major source of power in any society derives from the ownership and control of the means of production (whether this involves ownership of land, as in Feudal societies, or various commodities, as in Capitalist societies), we also need to understand the way in which any society is organized in economic terms.
2. Religious beliefs and practices are not understandable simply in terms of individual psychologies / motivations. Ideas about the world, for example, don't just jump, fully-developed, into people's heads. On the contrary, Marx argued that it was the material facts of people's existence (the social conditions under which they lived, worked and so forth) that produced ideas about the way of the world.
3. In order to understand social phenomena such as religious beliefs, practices and so forth, we have to look at the underlying, structural, causes that create such phenomena. In this respect, people follow religious beliefs because something about the way in which societies are structured leads them to develop ideas that seem to explain their social conditions.

To sum-up these ideas, before we move-on to look at Marx's explanation of the role played by religious beliefs in the change from Feudal to Capitalist modes of production (as occurred in Britain, for example, during the 17th / 18th centuries), we can note that:

- a. Ideas about the world (ideologies / ideological frameworks) do not arise in a social vacuum. On the contrary, such ideas are clearly rooted in the way in which people experience the social / natural world.
- b. Logically, therefore, ideas about the world do not produce social change. On the contrary, it is social change that produces changes in the way people think about the social world in which they live. This idea is important, in this particular context, since it argues that religion is not an initiator of social change; rather, it is seen as a response to social change.

We can understand this in the context of Marx's argument that,

"Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the sentiment of a heartless world and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people."

A number of points are worthy of note here:

1. That it is the way in which people experience the world that produces the "need" for religion as a means of explaining / rationalizing their conditions.
2. Like Durkheim, Marx saw religion as an integrating force in any society, insofar as one of its purposes appears to be that of "bringing people together in some form of (apparently) common cause". However, because Marx theorized the nature of societies in a fundamentally different way (seeing social organization as being based upon potential class conflicts) he saw religious ideas not as something that was of "benefit" to "society as a whole", but rather as being productive of different kinds of "benefit" for different social classes.
 - For the working class, the "benefit" they gained was a feeling of relief from their oppression in society.
 - For the ruling class, however, the benefits were more-tangible, insofar as religious ideas could be utilized as a way of deflecting criticism from the unequal distribution of wealth and income in society.

In addition, as we shall see, Marx explained the role of religious ideas in the transformation between Feudal and Capitalist societies in terms of conflict within dominant social classes. In this respect, Marx argued that religious ideas played a significant part in social change only in relation to the differing abilities of powerful economic classes to use such ideas as a rationale for the promotion of social change.

In this respect, Britain in the Middle Ages was characterized, by Marx, by the presence of two, powerful, factions within the ruling class - those who wanted to maintain the economic status quo and those who wanted to change it to their advantage...

3. Religion is not something imposed upon people. It was not some form of elaborate conspiracy dreamt-up by a ruling class to keep the working class "in their place". On the contrary, it was something to which people - whose experience of the world involved little more than grinding poverty, disease, misery and social degradation - turned because religion offered an ideological framework that offered them hope. In this respect, the "hope" that was on offer from Christianity was the promise of a "better life after death" if one accepted one's lot in life.

Thus, although Marx saw this form of hope as cruelly misleading and illusory, in the sense that religion involved a form of ideological oppression, he recognized that it arose from the material conditions of people's experience in the world.

In this respect, the concept of alienation is significant (see my previous notes on this concept in the "Theories of Religion" handout), since Marx argued that people turned towards religious ideas because they were alienated from both themselves and the society in which they lived. For Marx, all forms of religion were seen to be products of alienation and, for this reason, it is important that you understand this central concept...

Before we turn towards an analysis of Marx's explanation of the role of religion in the change from Feudalism to Capitalism, a couple of points are worth noting:

1. Marx saw ownership and control of the means of production in any society as a crucial variable in explanation of that society. From ownership stemmed wealth, power, influence and so forth.
2. Societies are characterized in terms of conflicts between various classes that are centred upon the vital question of who owns and controls the means of physical production. Economically powerful classes were, in this respect, politically and ideologically powerful because their ownership of the means of production gave them control over the way in which material goods / wealth were produced, distributed and exchanged.

In turn, this gave an economically-dominant class power, because control over the way in which resources are controlled necessarily gave this class influence over the way in which a society was politically organized (in simple terms, their views / ideas were important).

3. Ideas about the nature of the world arose out of people's experience in the world (and not the other way around). Thus, social change, for Marx, arose out of conflicts between and within social classes which, in turn, produced ideas that rationalized the outcome of social change.

Religion and Social Change (The Transition From Feudalism To Capitalism).

The main characteristics of a Feudal (or "Estate") system of economic production can be summarized as:

- a. A rigid, (closed), system of social stratification that involved little or no movement up or down the class structure.
- b. Ownership of land was extremely important, since such societies were predominantly agricultural. The production of food was probably the most significant commodity and if you were able to control food production (through land ownership) this made you extremely powerful - economically, politically and ideologically.
- c. The system was based upon a system of rights and responsibilities, mainly involving the exchange of land rights for service.

The monarch, for example, gave the nobility the right to control land in exchange for the responsibility of providing armed soldiers in times of internal / external threat.

In turn, the nobility granted land to armed retainers (such as knights), in exchange for their service in times of threat.

In a sense, everyone gained something from the Feudal system (right down to the lowliest peasant, since they gained the protection of the Nobility), but the higher up the social scale you go, the more the benefits of this system are apparent...

d. The Catholic Church was extremely powerful (in terms of both the ownership of land and the monopoly of knowledge in society). Catholicism, as a body of religious ideas, (an ideological framework that explained the nature of the world), stressed an acceptance of the "natural order" to the social world in terms of it being:

- God-given
- Immutable (impossible for people to change).

In this respect, Marx argued, the Catholic religion provided a useful ideological rationale for maintaining the economic and political status quo in Feudal society.

The Protestant religion, on the other hand, stressed the concept of "free will":

Although God had clearly made the world, He had given men the freedom to find their own way to ultimate salvation. In this respect, people were to be ultimately judged on the basis of their good works and their sins during their lifetime.

The basic differences between the two forms of Christianity are relatively clear:

Catholicism stressed the need for order, respect and deference to one's "social superiors" (because they had been made superior by God) and so forth. The Catholic Church, therefore, played a significant ideological role in the maintenance of the status quo not only because of its monopoly of knowledge, but also because of its very significant economic stake in Feudal society.

Protestantism, on the other hand, stressed a rather more "radical" set of ideas, in that people would either go to Heaven or hell on the basis of what they did in life. You could, in effect "work your way to Heaven".

For Marx, however, the significance of these different ideological frameworks lay not in the nature of their different points of view about salvation and so forth, but in relation to the way in which they could be used, by different social classes, to legitimate their struggle for economic power. To understand this idea, we need to understand something about the nature of society itself.

1. Although Britain was a predominantly Feudal society during the 17th century, technological advances (in the shape of what we have come to call the "Industrial Revolution"), began to affect the way in which commodities could be produced. In effect, it is in this period that we start to see the possibility of the mass production of commodities...

2. In this respect, we also see the emergence of a "merchant class" that was able to take advantage of the opportunities created by emerging technologies to advance their economic power (at the expense of both the old Feudal aristocracy and the peasantry).

3. This merchant class, while becoming increasingly powerful in economic terms, required an ideology that allowed them to challenge the "old existing social order" in order to fully exploit the new opportunities for political power. In short, they required an ideology that would allow them to legitimately translate their economic power into political power...

4. In this respect, the Protestant religion provided a "ready made" form of ideological framework since it allowed this class (what we have terms the "emergent bourgeoisie") to emphasize the role played by enterprise, risk-taking and so forth in the creation of wealth.

In a world in which power was effectively centralized in the hands of a Catholic hierarchy and Feudal aristocracy, Protestant ideas provided an ideological impetus to emergent Capitalism.

Thus, in a rapidly-changing world, the Protestant religion provided a dynamic rationale for Capitalism (at the expense of Feudalism). It was a flexible, adaptable, religion unencumbered by (Catholic) notions of immutability.

In relation to the above, religion could be seen as a force for social change, insofar as it facilitated the changes that were already starting to occur in Feudal society. In this sense, social change clearly occurred (with the effective replacement of an aristocratic ruling class by a Capitalist (or Bourgeois) ruling class), but Marx argues that it was not religious ideas that caused that change. Such ideas simply facilitated / accelerated social change rather than caused that change to occur.

For Marx, therefore, the change from one mode of production to another (Feudal / Agricultural to Capitalist / Industrial) was something that was inevitably going to occur (since technological advances were being made that would revolutionize commodity production) - albeit over a long period of time (2 - 300 years). The role of ideology (in the form of religious ideas) in this situation was that of providing an ideological impetus / rationale for such changes. Thus:

Change would not have occurred without the opportunities for social / economic development afforded by technological innovation.

Control over the exploitation of these technological developments was consolidated by an emerging Bourgeoisie by their ability to adopt Protestant ideas as a rationale for their behaviour.

In effect, they were able to challenge the old order economically precisely because they were able to challenge it ideologically.

In this respect, Marx characterized religion as both:

1. A conservative force opposed to change.
2. A dynamic force that provided the ideological rationale for the exploitation of technological developments.

Having outlined Marx's views on the relationship between religion and social change, it is now necessary to contrast them with the views of **Max Weber**.

Like Marx, Weber was concerned with the analysis of why Capitalism occurred when it did. Technological change had always occurred in human society, but Weber wanted to know why Capitalist ideas took root when they did:

For example, Copernicus used the technological development of the telescope to argue that the Earth was not the centre of the Universe (as argued by the Catholic Church). His radical ideas were, however, suppressed under the weight of religious orthodoxy.

What Weber wanted to know, therefore, was what was so special / unique about a society such as Britain that allowed technological changes (taking place over a long period of time) to develop into an economic system that would challenge and ultimately replace, the old Feudal order.

To understand Weber's argument, therefore, we need to look at the central role he afforded religion in the promotion of social change.

Max Weber: "The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism", 1904

A useful starting-point for the analysis of Weber's work on religion might be to briefly contrast his basic theoretical position with that of Durkheim and Marx. In this respect, Giddens ("Sociology", 1989) notes the contrast in the following way:

"Weber's writings on religion differ from those of Durkheim in concentrating on the connection between religion and social change, something to which Durkheim gave little attention. They contrast with the work of Marx because Weber argues that religion is not necessarily a conservative force; on the contrary, religiously inspired movements have often produced dramatic social transformations."

Weber on Religion and Social Change...

Like Marx, Weber was interested in an analysis of how societies change. His basic argument, in this respect, was that change comes about through a combination of many factors - of which technological development was but one type:

A "multi-causal" - as opposed to mono-causal - approach to change.

More specifically, Weber tried to understand how Capitalism came into existence in some societies that had reached a particular level of technological sophistication whilst, in similar societies, such changes did not appear to take place. In looking at the many possible variables involved in this developmental change, Weber chose to focus his attention upon the role of religion as a key ideological factor (or variable) in the development of Capitalism.

The role of religion was seen by Weber to be crucial in the development of Capitalism because of the type of cross-cultural, comparative, methodology that he developed in his work.

In his historical analysis of various societies, Weber believed that religious ideas played a crucial part in providing the political and ideological impetus necessary for the adoption of new economic forms and techniques. For example:

In his analysis of China, Weber believed that the essential technological ingredients for the development of Capitalism were present in Chinese society without Capitalism - as a politico- economic system of social organization - actually developing.

The reason for this, he argued, was that China lacked the political and ideological impetus necessary for the production of social change.

In this respect, Weber basically agreed with Marx, insofar as he believed that neither ideas nor technological changes alone could produce social change (Leonardo Da Vinci, for example, outlined the basic idea of a helicopter long before his society was technologically capable of making one).

Where he differed, however, was in his perception of the role of religious ideas, coupled with technological advances, as a crucial variable in the development of Capitalism...

Define the idea of a "comparative method" of sociological analysis:

What might be the advantages, for sociologists, of using a comparative method of analysis?

For Weber, in looking at societies where Capitalism initially developed, he argued that the common denominator - or variable - between each was the Protestant religion.

More specifically, he argued that it was an off-shoot from Protestantism - namely, Calvinism - that was the key to the change from a predominantly feudal, agricultural (agrarian), society to a society that was thoroughly Capitalist in its economic and political organization.

"Calvinism", according to Weber, provided the necessary "spirit of Capitalism" - it provided the necessary impetus for change at an historical moment when the conditions (in Western Europe and North America) were ripe for change. In each of these areas, the philosophy of Calvinism was present and most of the early Capitalist entrepreneurs / merchants were drawn from the ranks of this religion.

However, simply because a correlation existed between the development of Capitalism and Calvinist ideas does not mean that the latter caused the former to occur. As we have seen in Marx's analysis of religion, the reverse might be true - that the development of Capitalist forms of production into the dominant social mode might have created the conditions under which Calvinist ideology could flourish...

In this respect, we need to look more closely at the nature of Weber's understanding of the Calvinist ideas and activities upon which he based his analysis.

Using a text-book, can you outline the distinction between a "correlation" and a "cause"?

The Philosophy of Calvinism - A Brief Outline

We can outline the philosophy of Calvinism, as it developed throughout the 16th century, in the following way:

Firstly, Calvinists reasoned that, since God was, by definition, omnipotent ("all-knowing"), it followed that He knew both an individual's past and, most importantly, their future. Since God's knowledge was absolute, He knew, in effect, who would achieve salvation in the after-life and who would be damned, even before each individual had lived their lives. Calvinists, therefore, adhered to the doctrine of predestination - the idea that one's life-course is predetermined.

The notion of God's omnipotence is not something peculiar to Calvinism - most religions invest this power in God. However, unlike most other religions, Calvinists reasoned that, since God already knew which individual's would be saved after death, it was not possible, by one's actions in life, to "influence" this decision - from the moment you were born, it was already determined as to whether or not you would receive salvation...

Unlike the Protestant religion in general, "good works" on earth were not a guarantee of salvation. Equally, Calvinists rejected the Roman Catholic notion that it was possible to repent and do penance for one's sins.

As might be imagined from the above, the idea of predestination posed a number of problems for Calvinists:

1. Firstly, since salvation was predetermined, no amount of good work on earth could influence one's ultimate destiny (either Heaven or Hell).
2. Secondly, the role of the Church within Calvinism was somewhat ambivalent, since Church Ministers enjoyed no "special relationship" with God, had no power to absolve sins and could not serve as an intermediary between God and the individual ("praying for their soul", for example).
3. Finally, and most importantly, the individual had no apparent way of knowing whether or not he or she was predestined to achieve salvation (in Calvinist terms, whether or not they were one of God's "Elect").

On the face of things, Calvinism appears to have been a fairly hopeless religious doctrine, in as much as the individual appears "helpless" in the face of God's omnipotence. However, by an interesting feat of logical inversion, Calvinists were able to avoid the potential spiritual isolation engendered by the doctrine of predestination. They achieved this by arguing that, although it was not possible to influence God's will, it was possible to infer whether or not an individual was one of the Elect by the type of life that they led...

A member of the Elect would, by definition, lead a spiritually-pure life; he or she would renounce the sins of greed, jealousy, gluttony and the like. In addition, as one of the Elect, an individual would also be successful in their lifetime - they would prosper in the material sense - since God would not allow someone who was predestined to be damned (someone who was not Elect) to prosper and enjoy their life on earth.

In what specific way was the Calvinist philosophy different from other Christian religions?

In your own words, explain how Calvinists' "logically inverted" the idea of predestination in order to avoid the "hopelessness" to which the text refers:

It is in the above idea - that it is possible to infer who is Elect - that Weber saw the emergent "spirit of capitalism", since it is evident that Calvinism, whilst looking towards spiritual salvation, actively encouraged its followers to strive for material wealth and well-being. It is this idea that we now need to look at in a bit more detail.

Calvinism, as a religious philosophy, demanded of the individual hard work and material success - not as objectives in themselves, but as "proof" of an individual's status as one of the Elect. It was in this respect that the significance of technological changes in society come into play.

In the first place, Calvinists were not members of the feudal aristocracy and, in feudal society, there were few opportunities for non-aristocrats to acquire land. On the other hand, as part of the peasantry / working class, there were equally few opportunities to acquire material success...

However, the technological developments of the 16th and 17th centuries - the development of steam and gas power, the machinery that could use these energy sources and so forth - presented opportunities for an emergent, enterprising, bourgeoisie, insofar as technological developments could be harnessed to revolutionize the production process in society. For the first time, machines could be used to develop factory-type production for the mass-production of goods.

Thus, according to Weber, at this particular point in human history, two complimentary factors came together - technological developments that could revolutionize material production and the spirit of endeavour and enterprise that could take advantage of the opportunities presented...

Calvinism, by its very nature, fostered an increasing spirit of efficiency amongst its adherents - if the traditional way of doing something was not efficient, then it had to be replaced or improved in some way. Calvinists actively embraced new technological developments as a means of improving efficiency and increasing the productivity of their (and others) labour (something, it hardly needs to be added, that is crucial in the development of Capitalism).

One further point that needs to be noted is the question of "profit". To prove oneself Elect was a life-long process and it followed that Calvinists could not simply sit-back and enjoy the fruits of their work. For this reason, ploughing profits back into the enterprise was not simply prudent Capitalism - the continued perception of oneself as Elect depended upon continued economic success. In this respect, work was not seen as an end towards a better life on earth (although it did, of course, have this "unintended" effect); work was seen as the way to prove - both to oneself and others - spiritual purity, and this "proof" was something that the individual had to continually strive to achieve, since to do otherwise would simply be to demonstrate one's unworthiness to be considered Elect...

Criticisms of Weber

As you might expect, Weber's provocative analysis of the relationship between the development of Capitalism and the Calvinist religion has not been without its critics and the following readings represent a brief resume of some of the main points that have been advanced by such critics. In general, such criticisms fall into three main categories:

1. Those that focus upon the beliefs of Calvinists:

Sombart ("Luxury and Capitalism", 1907), for example, has argued that Calvinist beliefs forbade the pursuit of money, the accumulation of wealth and so forth. As we have seen, Weber was quite explicit on this point:

Firstly, Calvinists did not pursue money for its own sake (this was a largely "unintended" consequence) and, secondly, Calvinists resolved / rationalized the accumulation of profit as a means of ensuring that their business enterprises continued to flourish (ploughing profits back into the enterprise). If business continued to grow, this proved their worthiness to be considered Elect.

2. Those that argue that in many parts of the world where Calvinism developed, Capitalism did not:

3. Marxists, amongst others, have disputed the idea that Calvinist ideology led to the development of Capitalism.

As we've seen, this idea is implicit in Marx's analysis of religion, whilst Kautsky ("Foundations of Christianity", 1953), explicitly argues that early Capitalists appropriated and exploited the ideas of Protestantism and Calvinism to both justify their activities and as an ideological rationalisation of those activities in a hostile, feudal, environment. Capitalism, therefore, developed independently of religion.

Weber's "response" to such ideas was that we cannot understand social change in a mono-causal way. Religious ideas, he argued, constituted a significant factor - in combination with technological developments - that led to the development of a specifically Capitalist form of economics. Weber did not claim that there was a necessary, causal, relationship between Calvinism and Capitalism. He merely argued that at a particular moment in human social development there was a clear correspondence between the two - whether or not one "caused" the other is probably something that cannot be satisfactorily resolved...

As we have seen, the question of whether or not religion can be a causal factor in social change is difficult to answer categorically. The question is a complex one and answers to it are bound-up in the general theoretical perspective of various writers. As an example, we can use a list taken from Haralambos ("Themes and Perspectives", 1995), where he provides 6 examples where he claims that religion has played a prominent part in the creation of social change.

However, these examples may not satisfactorily answer the question of whether or not it is religion, in itself, that is a force for social change. In this respect, it is possible to argue that only under very specific circumstances does religion become the channel for various forms of social discontent. We can illustrate this by borrowing from Marxist deviancy theory and applying this theory to the relationship between religion and social change.

In their analysis of deviance, the "New Left Realist" (Democratic Marxist) sociologists John Lea and Jock Young ("What is to be done about Law and Order?") use three related concepts to show how deviance is socially produced, namely:

- a. Sub-culture (a group of people in a similar social situation). This represents a political dimension to people's social situation.
- b. Relative deprivation (a feeling that, in relation to the rest of society this group is economically disadvantaged). This represents an economic dimension to people's social situation.
- c.. Marginalisation (the situation where a group of people find themselves pushed to the margins of society, where they lack any real form of political representation or expression for their needs). This represents an ideological (or cultural) dimension to people's social situation.

In very basic terms we could argue, in relation to each example, that religion is the channel for social discontent, rather than the cause of social change. For example, in situations in which a social group (a sub-culture) feels itself to be exploited and oppressed (relative deprivation) and is denied the means to express this discontent politically - through a political party, trade union or whatever - (marginalisation), religion can be used as a channel for this discontent.

In Northern Ireland, the Catholic minority believed that it was impossible to gain adequate political representation in a society where Protestants had an in-built majority (it should also be noted that the Catholic Church did not support the activities of Irish nationalists).

In Nicaragua, the Somoza dictatorship denied all but a small elite any political or economic power.

In the USA, blacks were denied political representation through the main political parties (Republican and Democrat).

In Iran, a dictatorship headed by the Shah denied the majority any form of political or economic representation.

In Poland, the Communist Party dictatorship denied political representation to the majority of the population.

In South Africa, the Afrikaans (white) dictatorship denied effective political representation to non-whites.

In general terms, the situation is more complex than the above suggests (for example, for religion to function as a channel of political dissent it is necessary for the Church to see itself as a legitimate focus for dissent), but it does suggest one way in which we could argue that, even in the most apparently promising examples of the relationship between religion and social change it is possible to make a case for the idea that religion is not, in itself, a force for social change. Rather, it is an inherently conservative social force that can, on occasions, be used as a channel for political discontent.