

Section C – Religion

Question 5

- 5 'Religion supports the interests of the rich and powerful.'
Evaluate this view.

[35]

Specimen answer

Conflict theorists argue that religion supports the interest of the rich and powerful. For Marxists, religion supports the interests of the bourgeoisie, the group with power due to their ownership of the means of production. Feminists agree that religion supports the interests of the powerful, but for them religion supports the interests of men rather than those of a capitalist class.

Marxists see religion as an ideology that distorts people's perception of reality in capitalist society. Marxists argue that we live in a capitalist society where the bourgeoisie (ruling-class) exploit the proletariat (working-class). Marx argued that religion is an ideological weapon used by the ruling-class to disguise their exploitation of the proletariat and to prevent the proletariat from recognising its own interests. Marx described religion as 'the opium of the people'. By this, he meant that religion is like a drug that both dulls the pain of exploitation and prevents the working-class from improving their situation. Marx argued that religion dulls the pain of oppression by promising a paradise of eternal life for those who follow their religious duties. Religion also justifies the social order by providing an overall narrative for why the world is as it is. In this way religion presents the social structure as God-given and inevitable. Religion also dulls the pain of oppression by offering a hope of supernatural intervention to solve problems. Religion's followers can pray for help with problems they face and this hope can make the present more acceptable.

At the same time, religion prevents the proletariat from improving their situation by acting as a mechanism of social control. Marx described how religion preaches submissiveness and humbleness. In this way, religion keeps people in their place and prevents them from improving their situation. In this way, Marxists see religion as a conservative force – it acts to maintain society as it is. By preventing the proletariat from seeing how they could truly improve their situation, religion contributes to a false class consciousness. It blinds the workers from their true situation and diverts their attention from the true source of their problem – the system of capitalism.

There is a wealth of historical evidence that can be seen to support the Marxist view of religion. The caste system of traditional India was justified by Hindu religious beliefs. Likewise, in medieval Europe, kings and queens were seen to rule by divine right. In the USA during the era of slavery, slave owners often encouraged the conversion of slaves to Christianity, seeing it as a controlling influence that helped to prevent them from fighting against slavery. Similarly, in England during the

$$A01 = 9$$

$$A02 = 11$$

$$A03 = 15$$

industrial revolution employers used religion as a means of controlling the masses and encouraging them to remain sober and work hard. Overall, these examples support the idea that religion is a conservative force that serves the interests of those in positions of power.

However, Marx has been criticised as in some situations religion can be force for social change. Gramsci, a neo-Marxist, argues that some clergy may help to challenge ruling-class hegemony in society by acting as organic intellectuals. For example, Billings studied two sets of workers in the 1920s and 1930s who were both religious. He points out that organic intellectuals helped miners, one of the groups, to rebel against the status quo as they were more rebellious. Religion provided the organic intellectuals to give leadership, organisation and support to the miners.

Feminists agree with Marxists that religion serves the interests of the powerful, but they see religion as helping to maintain male domination of society. Feminists argue that religion is patriarchal and legitimises women's subordination. For example, sacred texts are often filled with male gods or prophets and the women in the Bible are often portrayed to be evil such as Eve eating the fruit first causing humanity's expulsion from the Garden of Eden. Places of worship often segregate the sexes with women sometimes seated behind a screen. Religions may not allow women to take higher offices in a religion, for example in Catholicism women are not allowed to be priests. Also, religious laws and customs have stopped women from having full rights. Women may not have access to divorce or may have to dress in a particular way such as wearing a hijab. Therefore, feminists argue that women are treated unfairly in religion and religion performs an ideological function of supporting patriarchy. As such this supports the powerful, in this case men.

However, some sociologists argue that religion can be supportive to women. For example, the hijab can be seen as a sign of liberation which allows Muslim women to enter the public sphere or join higher education. Religious feminists also argue that religion can enable women to gain status and respect for their domestic role. For example, Pentecostalism has strong beliefs that men should respect women. Women can use this belief to ensure they do not face oppression from husbands.

Some sociologists disagree with the general view of conflict theories that religion supports the interests of the rich and powerful. Malinowski, an anthropologist, suggests that religion provides psychological benefits to individuals by reducing anxiety and tension. In this way religion benefits individuals and also benefits society as a whole through mitigating stresses that could threaten the social order. Malinowski argued that this can be seen clearly in times of crisis as in all societies birth, marriage and death are surrounded by religious rituals. Malinowski also argued that religion relieves anxiety in important but unpredictable situations. He used an

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example from his fieldwork with the Trobriand Islanders to illustrate this function. Trobriand Islanders are fishermen. When fishing in lakes they were relatively safe and relied only on their skill and not on religious ritual. However, when the Trobrianders went fishing in the ocean they performed rituals before the trip. This was due to the increased dangers of ocean fishing. These examples highlight that religion can be used to support all members of a society, not just the rich and powerful.

Religion may perform positive functions for society as a whole rather than just for the benefit of the rich and powerful. For example, functionalists argue that religion unites people in a social solidarity through a value consensus which is the shared norms and values in society. Functionalists use the example of totemism. Durkheim studied the Arunta tribe who came together to worship a symbol known as a totem. By worshipping the totem, the tribe were united. Durkheim considered this worship to show the tribe actually worshipped the society. This shows that religion does not always serve the rich and powerful but performs the function of bringing a society together, which benefits everyone within the society.

In conclusion, religion can be seen to support the rich and powerful by supporting capitalism and patriarchy. Religion often justifies the suffering of either the lower class or women by persuading these groups that their suffering is God's plan rather than due to the oppression of either the ruling-class or men. However, this does neglect the many ways in which religion can be a positive experience for all, rather than just the rich or powerful.

Examiner comment

Level 3 is achieved for AO1 because the candidate demonstrates a good understanding of the underlying theoretical debates about the role of religion and uses this well in discussing the links between conflict perspectives and the idea that religion serves the interests of the rich and powerful. A detailed account of the Marxist theory of religion is used to illustrate the view on which the question is based. This includes good use of relevant concepts such as ideology, social control, oppression, and exploitation. Understanding of the view on which the question is based is also demonstrated through discussion of the feminist analysis of the patriarchal aspects of religion.

Level 4 is achieved for AO2 skills because there is good interpretation and application of relevant sociological material. For example, relevant historical evidence is selected to support the Marxist view that religion serves the interests of the ruling-class. A range of relevant examples are also used to illustrate the feminist argument that religion serves the interests of men. In the answer, the evidence is interpreted accurately and relates back to the view that religion supports the interests of the rich and powerful.

Level 4 is achieved for AO3. Very good analysis and evaluation is shown through explicit evaluation of the Marxists and feminist views on religion, using Billings as evidence against the Marxist view and evidence that religion can be supportive of women to evaluate the feminist view. The candidate also considers a range of contrasting views and evidence through the functionalist contributions of Malinowski and Durkheim, demonstrating a good understanding of the complexity of the issues raised by the question.

Alternative approaches to the question

An alternative approach to this question would be to consider Weber's analysis of the role of religion in the rise of capitalism. Weber used his historical study of the origins of capitalism as a basis for criticising Marxist ideas about the links between religion and class domination. This could have been drawn out as a criticism of the view expressed in the question.

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In the above response, the candidate uses Gramsci's ideas to criticise the Marxist perspective. The candidate could also have noted ways in which Gramsci, as a neo-Marxist, argued in favour of the view that religion in most cases supports the capitalist power structure.

A further alternative approach would be to more directly analyse the limitations of the view that religion supports the interests of the rich and powerful. For example, the candidate could have challenged the economic determinism implicit in the Marxist theory of religion or used evidence about religious participation and belief to directly question the extent of religiosity among subordinate groups.

Common mistakes (Essay question)

- A likely mistake made by candidates with this question is to link the view that religion supports the interests of the rich and powerful with a relevant theory (Marxist, feminist), but without explaining the actual mechanisms through which religion achieves this effect. The specimen answer avoids this by offering a clear and sustained account of how, in the Marxist view, religion is linked with the exploitation and oppression of the working-class in the interests of the ruling-class.
- A problem candidates encounter in answering a question of this type is confusion about the significance of Weber's study of the role of religion in the rise of capitalism. Although Weber was writing about the links between religion and capitalism, his findings should not be seen as supporting the Marxist view that religion serves the interests of the capitalist class. On the contrary, Weber used his study of the rise of capitalism to critically confront what he saw as the unjustified economic determinism in the orthodox Marxist perspective.
- A common mistake is that candidates rely primarily on juxtaposing different theories as a form of evaluation, but without explicitly relating the alternative theories back to the view in the question. Answers that rely primarily on the description of contrasting theories as a form of evaluation would achieve no higher than Level 3 for AO3. To access Level 4 for AO3, there must also be some direct and explicit analysis and evaluation of the view on which the question is based.

Generic levels of response **How marks are Allocated: P4**

Level	AO1: Knowledge and understanding	Marks
3	• Good <u>knowledge</u> and <u>understanding</u> of the view on which the question is based. • The response contains a <u>range of detailed points</u> with good use of <u>concepts</u> and <u>theory/research evidence</u>.	7-9
2	• Reasonable knowledge and understanding of the view on which the question is based. • The response contains either a narrow range of detailed points or a wider range of underdeveloped points, with some use of concepts and references to theory or research evidence.	4-6
Level	AO2: Interpretation and Application	Marks
4	• Very good <u>interpretation</u> and <u>application</u> of <u>relevant sociological material</u>. • The material <u>selected</u> will be <u>accurately interpreted</u> and consistently applied to the question in a logical and well-informed way.	10-11
3	• Good interpretation and application of sociological material. • The material selected will be accurate and relevant but not always consistently applied to the question in a way that is logical and clear.	7-9
2	• Reasonable interpretation and application of sociological material. • The material selected will be mainly accurate but its relevance to the question may be confused or unclear at times.	4-6
Level	AO3: Analysis and Evaluation	Marks
4	• Very good analysis and evaluation. • Clear and <u>sustained analysis</u> of the view on which the question is based, with detailed and <u>explicit evaluation</u>. • There is also likely to be a range of contrasting views and/or <u>evidence</u> discussed, demonstrating good understanding of the complexity of the issues raised by the question.	12-15
3	• Good analysis and evaluation. • The evaluation may be explicit and direct but not sustained, or it will rely on a good outline of contrasting views and/or evidence, clearly focussed on evaluating the view in the question.	8-11

Contextualisation
linking every point back to the question
wording of the question set!

Sustained Assessment, for the "For side" & "Against side"