



Religion and Society

Unit 2: Marxist Philosophy

Introduction — What is religion?



- Religion is a system of beliefs which is premised on the belief in supernatural forces, often in the form of deities.
- Examples of organized religions include Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Judaism.
- Religion is as old as humanity itself, and continues to influence modern society and class struggle.

“Religion is one of the forms of spiritual oppression which everywhere weighs down heavily upon the masses of the people, overburdened by their perpetual work for others, by want and isolation.” —Vladimir Lenin, *Socialism and Religion*

How did religion develop?

- Religion first took shape in prehistoric times as a consequence of evolving cognitive abilities.
- The earliest religions were polytheistic and deeply rooted in nature. Particular manifestations of early religion include animism, fetishism, and totemism. As class society formed, religion took on a character of defending ruling classes.
- As centralized states grew and feudalism developed, polytheism was eventually supplanted by monotheism.



“Religious suffering is, at one and the same time, the expression of real suffering and a protest against real suffering. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people.” —Karl Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*

How is religion used in class society?



- Religion is a core aspect of the *superstructure* of society. Religion has been used by ruling class to justify their positions against the exploited.
- Religion distracts the exploited classes from resolving societal issues and waging class struggle.
- Religiosity has decreased as a result of social development, and will become superfluous under socialism.

“Those who toil and live in want all their lives are taught by religion to be submissive and patient while here on earth, and to take comfort in the hope of a heavenly reward. But those who live by the labour of others are taught by religion to practice charity while on earth, thus offering them a very cheap way of justifying their entire existence as exploiters and selling them at a moderate price tickets to well-being in heaven.” —Vladimir Lenin, *Socialism and Religion*

What is the Marxist stance on religion?

- Religion is idealist and metaphysical, and therefore is in opposition to Marxist dialectical materialism.
- Under socialism, religion is to become a purely private matter. Freedom of religion as well as anti-religious propaganda is to be upheld.
- The vanguard party, as a Marxist–Leninist formation, is to oppose religious principles and uphold dialectical materialism. Members of the party may not partake in religious practices nor promote religion.



“I am for expulsion from the Party of people who take part in religious ceremonies.” —Vladimir Lenin, *Collected Works Vol. 44*



Concluding question:

Have you ever been religious? If so, how did that change when you became a Marxist?