

COLLEGE GUILD
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Religion

Unit 2 of 3

Religion and Politics

In the last unit, we took a look at the ways religion has been mystified and dismissed by looking at the work of scholars William James and Jonathan Z. Smith who challenged such practices. Today we will be looking at how efforts to keep religion out of spheres of power have been made by looking at the work of Karl Marx and Saba Mahmood.

Karl Marx (1818-1883) is an enduring thinker in not only the study of religion, but also in economics and philosophy. His influence has been so great that there are people who identify as Marxists based on their political leanings. Marx is most famous for criticizing capitalism.

1. **Take a moment to look up the definition of capitalism.**
2. **Do you believe the United States is a capitalist state? Why or why not?**

Marx argued that capitalism and its obsession with commodities is responsible for creating class differences that leads to the pain and suffering of the lower class, in which the majority of people occupy. Because people are so removed from the production process—think factory style manufacturing where each person makes one piece of a greater product—even the workers become abstracted from themselves and what they're doing.

In his "Introduction to "Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*," Marx states:

"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" (54).

3. **How does Marx see religion? What is its connection to capitalism?**
4. **Why do you think Marx uses the word "opium" to describe religion?**

For Marx, religion is not a moment of divinity, but a human projection. Marx saw human beings as continually trying to transcend, to go beyond to a horizon instead of being in the present moment. For him, religion is a mere projection of man's self-consciousness.

He saw religion as a form of escape from the suffering of the capitalist world in two ways. It provides:

1. Cathartic expression of suffering through the rituals we do
2. Protest to suffering by providing a vision of utopia or better world

Therefore, he believed that religion should be abolished and replaced by a philosophy that would lead to a working class or proletariat revolution.

- 5. **Can you give examples for each way Marx saw religion as an opium?**
- 6. **Do you agree with Marx? Should religion be abolished? Is it inherently oppressive?**
- 7. **Is suffering even escapable? Or is it part of the human condition?**
- 8. **It is okay or even good that people have forms of escape from reality?**

While Marx saw religion as playing a key role in maintaining the oppression of capitalism, governments that operate on capitalistic principles also find religion to be dangerous to their agenda. Governments have attempted to keep religion out of government by creating so called secular and non-secular or religious spaces. The notion of secularism developed in response to the bloody Thirty Years War that racked Europe from 1618-1648 due to conflicts between Protestants and Catholics. In order to prevent such wars from happening, it was decided in Europe that governmental institutions should remain “religion free.”

Saba Mahmood, a distinguished scholar and professor of anthropology in the U.S. has looked at the notion of secularism in the United States today. She focuses particularly on the Islamic faith and interpretations of the Quran, the main text read by practitioners of Islam. In her essay, “Secularism, Hermeneutics, and Empire: The Politics of Islamic Reformation,” (2006) she, like Smith, does a case study to prove her point. She draws our attention to the Muslim World Outreach project, an endeavor aimed to “reform” traditionalist Islam that has united “moderate” Muslims and U.S. foreign policy makers together (332). She argues that both these groups share the view that traditionalists take the Quran too literally and must instead appreciate it in a certain context: as a literary, cultural and ultimately historically oriented artifact (336).

9. What do you think is the irony here that Mahmood is drawing our attention to?

Yes, the government is directly involved in discussing how religious texts should be understood! This violates the entire idea of secularism, in which the government has zero involvement in religious affairs in order to ensure that religion stays out of public spaces. Mahmood refers to this as a prime example of the way secularist ideology plays out in U.S. liberal political rule. She argues that secularism should not be defined by its support of religious toleration or pluralism, but instead as an ideology that proposes its own approach of interpreting and contextualizing religious texts.

10. Mahmood is basically debunking the idea that so-called secular and religious spaces actually exist. Rather, she boldly proposes the idea that secularism is in fact like a religion in its own right. Do you agree with her?

11. Do you think there is a certain level of religiosity to politics? Give examples to support your stance.

Mahmood concludes her essay by warning the reader of the ironically fundamentalist and universalist aspect of contemporary American secularism that seeks to eliminate or discredit other readings of religious texts, primarily the literalist approach epitomized by traditionalist Islam.

Based on these last two units, it seems like religion permeates spaces that it supposedly should be excluded from. In the next unit, we will be looking at how religion, particularly religious rituals, create new social realities or ways of envisioning the world. See you next time! 😊

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