



Religion and Society

Erich Fromm
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Religion is a system of ideas, norms, and rites that satisfy a need that is rooted in human existence, the need for a system of orientation and an object of devotion. This definition applies to all religions, whether they worship idols, pray to an invisible God, or have no concept of a „god,“ like Buddhism, for example. Man's idea of a „sacred“ being depends on social structure and cultural tradition. In most societies, religion and social structure form a coherent whole. Since man's character is determined by the social structure, its religion, being an expression of psychological needs that are anchored in existential conditions, is also socially determined.

Capitalist industrial society (like the „socialist“ state-capitalist societies) is profoundly irreligious. Its norms are maximal production, ruthless egoism, exploitation. Man's „salvation“ is maximal material success, his duty good „functioning.“

But man cannot stop dreaming. He longs for a world in which love, freedom, and justice are rooted, and since such a world does not exist, he creates a separate institution alongside society: religion. In it, he finds consolation, encouragement, hope, but also many illusions. And these illusions are necessary, for religion has made its peace with irreligious society. God and Mammon: to each his own. This compromise and the illusions it produces may be effective for a long time, but man always awakens again, notices that he is merely dreaming, and demands real salvation. Only a changed reality, a society that realizes the principles of love and human autonomy throughout its structure, can satisfy this {295} demand. In such a society, a separate religion would no longer be needed, for the society would have made the religious principles its own and would thereby have „sublated“ them as separate religious principles.

These comments also sketch what is essential in Karl Marx's position on religion. For him, religion was an opiate for man because it tries to satisfy his profoundest needs by illusions instead of allowing him to pluck the living flower. Marx was not antireligious. He was a profoundly religious person and an enemy of „religion“ for that very reason.