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Q7(b)

How do theories of Marx, Weber and Durkheim differ in understanding religion? Explain

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2025 · Sociology GS 1 · 20 marks · Sociological Thinkers: Karl Marx

Sociological Thinkers: Karl Marx - Historical materialism, mode of production, alienation, class struggle; Emile Durkheim - Division of labour, social fact, suicide, religion and society; Max Weber - Social action, ideal types, authority, bureaucracy, protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism; Talcott Parsons - Social system, pattern variables; Robert K. Merton - Latent and manifest functions, conformity and deviance, reference groups; Mead - Self and identity.

Core demand of the question

- **State Marx on religion:** ideology, opium, alienation, class
- **State Durkheim:** sacred and profane, collective effervescence, social cohesion
- **State Weber:** meaning, theodicy, Protestant ethic, disenchantment, this-worldly asceticism
- **Compare:** function versus meaning versus critique
- Keep differences sharp

Revision summary

Marx treats religion as ideological consolation and mystification in class society.

Durkheim treats religion as the sacred form of social solidarity and classification.

Weber treats religion as meaningful ethic that can steer economic and political action.

Differences follow the questions of critique, function and interpretation.

Marx expects unmasking; **Durkheim** expects the sacred to migrate; **Weber** traces disenchantment.

Do not flatten the three into a single sentence about the importance of faith.

Introduction

Karl Marx, **Max Weber** and **Emile Durkheim** all took religion seriously, and they took it as a social fact, not as a matter of private taste. They did not ask the same question. **Marx** asked whose power religion conceals. **Durkheim** asked how religion makes a society possible. **Weber** asked how religious meanings steer action and, sometimes, economic history. The differences are the syllabus point.

Body

Three theories

For **Marx**, religion is part of the superstructure. In a class society it offers consolation and inverted consciousness: the **opium of the people** soothes suffering that is produced by exploitation, and it can bless the earthly order as divine. Critique of heaven is therefore a step toward critique of earth. Religion is not the root of oppression, but it often mystifies the root.

Durkheim, in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, studied Australian totemism to find the elementary: the **sacred** set apart from the **profane**, and the rite in which the group experiences **collective effervescence**. God is society transfigured. Religion's function is to bind and to classify, to make moral community. Even in secular dress, national ceremonies can be religious in this sociological sense.

Weber began from meaning. People need a theodicy of fortune and suffering. The **Protestant ethic** essay linked inner-worldly asceticism to the spirit of capitalism, without saying that religion was only a mask for class. He compared prophets, priests, virtuosi and masses, and he traced **disenchantment** as rationalisation drains magical gardens. Religion can be a switchman of history, directing the tracks that material interests also lay.

How they differ

- **Marx is critical and historical-materialist**: look through belief to production. **Durkheim** is functional and morphological: look at rite and belonging. **Weber** is comparative and interpretative: look at ethic, organisation and unintended consequence. **Durkheim** downplays inner faith as sociology's object; **Weber** requires it. **Marx** expects religion to fade with emancipation; **Durkheim** expects the sacred to migrate; **Weber** expects a tension between vocation, bureaucracy and leftover charisma. Indian illustrations can be used lightly: a temple festival as Durkheimian solidarity, a reformist ethic as Weberian, and a landlord's dharma as Marxist ideology-provided the theories stay distinct and are not mashed into "all three said religion is important."

Flow diagram

Religion -> Marx ideology opium
Religion -> Durkheim sacred cohesion
Religion -> Weber meaning ethic
Marx ideology opium -> Class
Durkheim sacred cohesion -> Group
Weber meaning ethic -> Action and rationalisation

Conclusion

- **Marx, Durkheim and Weber differ in the question they put to religion**: ideology, cohesion, or meaningful action. A good comparison keeps those questions apart and then notes that a living religious field can carry all three processes at once without making the theories identical.

Facts & figures

Opium of the people

Marx's phrase for religion as heart of a heartless world and as inverted consciousness, not a casual insult.

Sacred and profane

Durkheim's basic classification, produced and renewed in ritual assembly.

Protestant ethic

Weber's argument that inner-worldly asceticism helped form a capitalist spirit, as elective affinity rather than simple cause.

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