

## SOC 105-001 Second Reflection Essay

### Religion and Labor

One similarity that struck me as interesting between Harari and our class reading was the role religion plays in Harari's book and Max Weber's work on capitalism. Both authors agree that religion or community plays a prominent role in people's happiness and contributes to a sense of worth in communities. But, both also agree that religion has taken a significant step back in modern society and plays much more of an ancillary role than the one it once occupied.

In Yuval Noah Harari's book *21 Lessons for the 21st Century*, he proclaims that religion holds no answers for the problems facing the human race. He contextualizes this stance by applying religion to three issues facing us in the near future.

The first of these is the technical aspect. Harari tells us that traditionally, religion offered wisdom in the form of healing. People would go to temples and religious leaders to cleanse themselves of sickness as opposed to hospitals. Harari also argues that this practice was due to the relatively archaic scientific information available at the time. People trusted religion more than science because science was often wrong and didn't solve many problems. However, Harari argues that the scale has gone the other way in the modern era, and science is now the dominant technical power. This shift is primarily due to science's ability to admit defeat and approach the problem differently. Science can evolve and get better with time. Religious priests and gurus, Harari says, "learn only how to make better excuses." Harari argues that though religion is still relevant in people's lives, it is no longer the primary resource for knowledge that it once was. Religion has instead morphed into a way for people to contextualize what science has taught

to a source of authority that supports truth.

The second way Harari analyzes religion is through the issue of policy. He offers that religious texts are outdated and therefore cannot be a reliable source of policy information relevant to the 21st century. He uses the example of Gandhi's vision for India. Inspired by the Vedas, Gandhi saw India as a series of micro-communities that were not reliant on importing and exporting goods. Instead, they just used and grew everything they needed. Harari argues this idea is entirely outdated. Though Gandhi is a beloved figure in India, his only influence in modern India is his face on their money. Harari also tells us that though countries have vastly different religions, they are more similar than different if you examine their economic policy. Harari argues that the best example of religion's outdated information is the recent development of artificial intelligence. He argues that religion has no stance on artificial intelligence because AI technology did not exist at the time. The problem facing society today is that religion contextualizes both the pro and anti-artificial intelligence arguments. So in that way, religion does not offer an answer to today's problems but merely provides an excuse for people to utilize to substantiate their point.

The third way Harari analyzes religion is through the issue of identity. He argues that religion is essential to this issue because it is ingrained in humans' social and historical lives to the point that it has become synonymous with human history. He posits that fiction is the basis of all identity, and religion is the most popular fiction humans have ever created. Identity is a crucial part of the issues facing the 21st century because society cannot exist without mass human cooperation. And because religion is the most popular fiction we have at our disposal, it is paramount in continuing human society's existence. But this, too, is not without some

divisive. Harari argues that countries could start a nuclear war over hundreds or thousands of years old texts. So though religion is not worthy of being disregarded entirely by 21st-century humans, it offers a far larger pool of downsides than benefits to modern human society.

In Max Weber's work *The Spirit of Capitalism and the Iron Cage*, he concludes that though capitalism is rooted in religion, modern capitalism has left behind the religious impetus to which it was initially attached. Weber explains that the current capitalist system is rooted in Calvinistic Protestantism in Christianity. The Calvinists believed in predestination, which is the belief that God had already determined if you were saved or damned at birth. Acknowledging this, the Calvinists began looking for signs of whether they were saved or damned during their lives. This desire to unveil their predetermined destiny evolved into the idea that the amount of wealth and material goods a person could amass during their lifetime reflected their status in the afterlife. It was this belief that kickstarted the capitalist system that we know today. However, since its inception, capitalism has lost all of its religious incentives. It replaced the need to gain insight about the afterlife with a necessity to gain power and influence in life without much thought of death. Though Weber argues that religion kickstarted the capitalist system, he states that modern capitalism has become something entirely devoid of purpose other than amassing as much wealth as possible.

Both Harari and Weber acknowledge the importance of religion as a building block that influenced the way society is today. They both argue that religion is an integral part of the human experience, and life without religion or some greater purpose is problematic. Weber believes that capitalism without a more significant purpose leaves people in a morally grey area that could lead to abuse or a feeling of worthlessness. Harari argues that religion is essential to keep society

that religion has a significantly diminished role in today's society. Harari argues that religion is not much more than social glue, and Weber argues that religion has been abandoned in exchange for the worship of wealth without moral implications.

The most significant inconsistency that struck me was the different thoughts Harari has on the future of capitalism and the labor force when compared to Karl Marx and his idea of "estranged labor." Both authors agree that capitalism will not end well for the laborers in its currently constructed form. But they vary wildly on their hypothesis for the future. Marx identifies the psychological and spiritual problems with capitalism and predicts an eventual overthrow of capitalism in favor of socialism or communism. Harari believes that workers won't get their chance to become estranged in the first place. The tipping point Marx predicted will never come, according to Harari. Instead, artificial intelligence will systematically replace workers with cheaper labor that can constantly work without employers considering morality or ethics in the workplace.

Harari envisions a world in which machines run the labor force, and all information is standardized. Doctors are controlled by artificial intelligence that centralizes all knowledge and can be updated and connected to millions of robots worldwide. This vision for the future is a long way away, Harari states, but he warns that all future laborers should anticipate jobs being lost to robotic replacements sooner than you may think. He explains that robots will take over menial labor jobs first. Things like factory work and other simple programmable jobs will be the first frontier. But soon, with artificial intelligence evolving at the current pace, we could see artificial intelligence begin to replace jobs once thought to be only possibly performed by humans. Harari explains that with recent advances in neuroscience, the fallacy that humans have

and interpret information based on previous results. And because we don't have any unexplainable or magical ability, artificial intelligence could reasonably replace jobs that require cognition and problem-solving. Harari uses the examples of a driver, lawyer, and banker as jobs that could be replaced by artificial intelligence once we figure out how to program and have robots analyze human emotional inputs and outputs.

In contrast to this, Karl Marx argued that capitalism is doomed for a different reason. He speculated that no economic system built around exploitation would work in the long term. He also theorized that they need to feel connected to their daily activities for people to have fulfilling lives. If people did not feel connected or feel prideful of their work, they would begin to lose touch with their world until they felt completely alienated. Marx called this phenomenon "estranged labor" and predicted that eventually, a majority of estranged laborers would revolt against the system they are estranged from in an attempt to change it. In a capitalist society, the process of becoming alienated from your labor begins when humans no longer possess what Marx says makes humans unique. The human ability to create and adapt any environment to one that is livable to humans is what Marx considers the defining characteristic of human nature. He argues that anything that a worker creates in a capitalist system is not something they can take part in or be proud of their work. This strips our unique ability away. Marx hypothesized that taking away this ability would reduce the workers to animals who can only recreate their environment or do the same tasks repeatedly. He argued this estrangement from labor would snowball into the worker's social life and eventually entirely alienate them from capitalism. What Marx did not consider was the possibility that the revolt he was predicting may never come.

evolve over time. Harari predicts that artificial intelligence and robots will replace the working class faster than workers will become estranged from their work. In contrast, Marx predicted that there would be a working-class revolt against the capitalist system, which would evolve into a system similar to communism.