4.4 Marxist and Neo-Marxist Perspectives on Religion as Ideology

AQA 7192 · about 65 minutes · Write-in edition

Total Marks

Name: _____ Date: ____ / ____ / _____

Answer ALL questions. For the 6-mark and 12-mark questions write your answers in full sentences and support points with sociological examples where possible. Time guidance: 65 minutes for this pack.

1 Describe one historical example of liberation theology in Latin America and explain briefly how it challenges a Marxist claim that religion only supports ruling-class interests.

(Total for Question 1 is 4 marks)

2 Explain one reason Marxist theory finds it difficult to account for the persistence of religion in state-socialist countries that aimed to remove class exploitation.

(Total for Question 2 is 4 marks)

3 Compare classical Marxism and Gramscian neo-Marxism on religion by explaining one difference, developing both sides of the comparison.

(Total for Question 3 is 4 marks)

4 Provide an outline and explanation, using examples where possible.

(Total for Question 4 is 6 marks)

5 Write a balanced, evaluative answer discussing Marxist and neo-Marxist views and criticisms, and reach a supported conclusion.

(Total for Question 5 is 12 marks)

6 Define what Marxists mean by religion being an 'ideology' in the context of capitalist societies.

(Total for Question 6 is 2 marks)

7 Identify and explain two reasons Marx said religion comforts the oppressed in capitalist societies.

(Total for Question 7 is 4 marks)

8 Describe one neo-Marxist refinement of Marx's account of religion as offering consolation to the oppressed while helping to sustain ruling-class domination.

(Total for Question 8 is 3 marks)

9 Define Marx's phrase 'opium of the people' as it is used to describe religion in capitalist societies.

(Total for Question 9 is 2 marks)

10 Item A: A report summarises two church-based campaigns in a Latin American country during the 1970s. Campaign 1 organised literacy classes and community cooperatives. Campaign 2 issued sermons stressing obedience to existing authorities and praying for social harmony. Using Item A and your own knowledge, explain one reason the church could be seen as supporting social change and one reason it could be seen as supporting the status quo.

(Total for Question 10 is 4 marks)

11 Explain Gramsci's idea of cultural hegemony and how it refines Marx's account of religion as offering consolation to the oppressed while helping to sustain ruling-class domination.

(Total for Question 11 is 4 marks)

Mark scheme · 4.4 Marxist and Neo-Marxist Perspectives on Religion as Ideology

Question 1

identifies a real example, e.g. Catholic priests and base communities promoting liberation theology, such as Camara or Romero in El Salvador	**B1**
development, e.g. these figures supported poor communities, opposed oppressive regimes and sometimes aligned with social movements	**B1**
explains how this challenges Marxism, e.g. religion here motivates resistance rather than passive acceptance	**B1**
further development, e.g. shows religion can promote social change and solidarity with the exploited, not just ruling-class ideology	**B1**

Answer: An example is liberation theology in Latin America where priests and base communities, for example priests inspired by Camara or Archbishop Romero, supported poor communities and opposed oppressive regimes; this challenges Marxism by showing religion can motivate resistance and promote social change rather than simply reinforcing ruling-class interests.

Question 2

identifies that religion persisted in some state-socialist societies despite official attempts to eradicate it	**B1**
development, e.g. persistence suggests religion can meet non-class needs such as community, identity or spiritual comfort	**B1**
links to Marxist difficulty, e.g. if religion exists without capitalist class structures, Marxist economic explanation seems incomplete	**B1**
further development, e.g. this requires Marxists to explain other social functions of religion or adapt their account	**B1**

Answer: Religion persisted in some state-socialist societies despite official suppression, suggesting it meets non-class needs such as community, identity or spiritual comfort; this challenges a straightforward Marxist economic explanation and requires Marxists to account for additional social functions of religion.

Question 3

identifies the classical Marxist emphasis on religion sustaining ruling-class domination	**B1**
develops the classical account, e.g. consolation makes exploitation more bearable and reduces pressure to challenge it	**B1**
contrasts this with the Gramscian view that religion can be a contested site of ideological struggle	**B1**
develops the Gramscian account, e.g. subordinate groups may reinterpret religious ideas to resist domination rather than consent to it	**B1**

Answer: Classical Marxism emphasises religion sustaining ruling-class domination: consolation makes exploitation more bearable and reduces pressure to challenge it. In contrast, Gramscian neo-Marxism sees religion as a contested site of ideological struggle, where subordinate groups may reinterpret religious ideas to resist domination rather than consent to it.

Question 4

identifies that Marxists see religion as legitimating class inequality (outline)	**B1**
explains that religion justifies the social order by presenting it as natural or divinely sanctioned	**B1**
provides an example, e.g. teachings about accepting suffering or reward in the afterlife	**B1**
explains consequence, e.g. this reduces class consciousness and collective resistance	**B1**
additional development, e.g. links to ruling-class institutions using religion to promote consent	**B1**
accurate use of Marxist terminology such as ideology or ruling class	**B1**

Answer: Marxists argue religion legitimates class inequality by presenting social arrangements as natural or divinely sanctioned, for example through teachings that encourage acceptance of suffering in this life for reward in the afterlife; this reduces class consciousness and collective resistance and can be reinforced by ruling-class institutions using religious ideas to promote consent.

Question 5

Level 1 Basic statements about religion and ideology, little sociological detail, limited or no use of evidence, no developed evaluation.	**1-3**
Level 2 Clear description of Marxist views that religion legitimates inequality, with some application; limited evaluation, for example one criticism or a brief alternative view.	**4-6**
Level 3 Developed analysis, including neo-Marxist refinements such as Gramsci and examples like liberation theology; evaluation present but not fully sustained, some balance and application to evidence.	**7-9**
Level 4 Sustained, well-supported evaluation weighing Marxist claims against strong counterarguments. Covers classical Marxism, Gramscian hegemony, liberation theology, persistence of religion in state-socialist societies, and concludes with a justified judgement on the extent to which religion is mainly conservative.	**10-12**

Indicative content:

- Classical Marxist claim that religion is an ideology serving ruling-class interests by legitimating inequality and distracting the oppressed through consolation and promises of an afterlife
- How religion functions to legitimate power, for example doctrines of divine order, moralising poverty and encouraging acceptance
- Neo-Marxist refinement: Gramsci's concept of hegemony showing ideology requires consent and is contested, making religion a site of struggle as well as domination
- Examples of religion as a force for change, such as liberation theology in Latin America (Camara, Romero) where clergy supported poor communities and resisted oppressive regimes
- Evidence that challenges Marxism, for example religious movements that oppose ruling elites, or persistence of religion in state-socialist countries, suggesting religion fulfils functions beyond just masking exploitation
- Other critiques: religion's diverse forms and social roles, agency of religious actors, and the need for Marxism to incorporate cultural and ideological complexity
- Balance and conclusion: religion often plays conservative ideological roles in many contexts, but it can also mobilise resistance and social change; on balance it is not solely or invariably a ruling-class tool

Question 6

identifies that an ideology is a set of beliefs and ideas that justify or support a particular social order or interests (oe)	**B1**
development, e.g. Marxists argue religion acts as an ideology by helping to justify inequality and the power of the ruling class	**B1**

Answer: An ideology is a set of beliefs and ideas that justify or support a particular social order; Marxists argue religion acts as an ideology by helping to justify inequality and the power of the ruling class.

Question 7

identifies that religion offers consolation about suffering, e.g. promises of reward in an afterlife	**B1**
development, e.g. hope of a future reward makes present suffering feel more bearable	**B1**
identifies that religion gives suffering a religious meaning, e.g. by presenting it as part of a divine plan	**B1**
development, e.g. seeing suffering as purposeful rather than meaningless can soothe the distress of oppression	**B1**

Answer: Religion promises reward in an afterlife, giving the oppressed hope of future compensation and making present suffering feel more bearable. Religion can also present suffering as part of a divine plan, giving it a meaning and purpose that soothes distress rather than leaving suffering feeling pointless.

Question 8

identifies a neo-Marxist idea, e.g. Gramsci's concept of hegemony or the idea of religion as a site of ideological struggle	**B1**
development, e.g. Gramsci argued ruling-class domination rests on consent as well as coercion	**B1**
further development, e.g. religion can be part of the struggle because subordinate groups may use religious ideas to resist or reinterpret domination	**B1**

Answer: Marx sees religion as offering consolation to the oppressed while helping to sustain ruling-class domination. A neo-Marxist refinement is Gramsci's concept of hegemony: domination rests on consent as well as coercion, and religious ideas can be contested and reinterpreted by subordinate groups to resist domination.

Question 9

identifies that the phrase means religion soothes or numbs the pain of exploitation for the oppressed (oe)	**B1**
development, e.g. by offering consolation rather than encouraging rebellion against unjust social structures	**B1**

Answer: The phrase means religion soothes or numbs the pain of exploitation for the oppressed, offering consolation rather than encouraging rebellion against unjust social structures.

Question 10

identifies that Campaign 1 supports social change, e.g. literacy classes and cooperatives empower poor communities	**B1**
development, e.g. empowerment can challenge economic exploitation and organise resistance, consistent with liberation theology examples	**B1**
identifies that Campaign 2 supports the status quo, e.g. sermons stressing obedience encourage acceptance of existing power relations	**B1**
development, e.g. focusing on prayer and harmony rather than structural reform diverts attention from causes of injustice	**B1**

Answer: Campaign 1 could be seen as supporting social change because literacy classes and community cooperatives empower poor communities and can help them organise against exploitation, reflecting liberation theology; Campaign 2 could be seen as supporting the status quo because sermons stressing obedience and social harmony encourage acceptance of existing power relations and divert attention from structural injustice.

Question 11

identifies cultural hegemony as the ruling class securing consent for its rule through culture and ideas	**B1**
development, e.g. domination is maintained by winning ideological consent, not only by force	**B1**
links Gramsci to religion, e.g. religion can be part of the cultural institutions producing consent	**B1**
further development, e.g. this allows for complex interactions where religion can both support and be contested by subordinate groups	**B1**

Answer: Cultural hegemony is the process by which the ruling class secures consent for its rule through culture and ideas, not only by force. Religion can be one institution producing consent, but subordinate groups can contest and reinterpret its ideas to resist domination. This refines Marx's emphasis on religion offering consolation to the oppressed while helping to sustain class domination by explaining how religion can also become a site of ideological struggle.