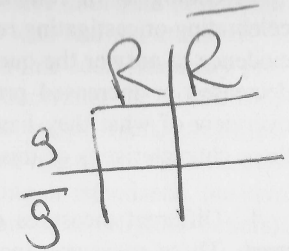


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7

Personal Religion: Depressant or Stimulant of Prejudice and Discrimination?

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Karl Marx described religion as the opiate of the masses. Adopting Marx's metaphor of religion as a drug, we wish to know whether religion is a depressant or stimulant of prejudice and discrimination. This question, although rarely cast in these terms, has been heavily researched by psychologists of religion.

The reason for interest in the effect of religion on prejudice is easy to understand. All major religions in our society preach love and acceptance of others. The acceptance is to be unconditional, not qualified by race, creed, sex, or color. Christianity in particular prides itself on its message of universal love: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female"—one might add, Black nor White—"for you are all one . . ." (Galatians 3:28). If a religion can indeed lead its followers to adopt and live such a belief, then it is a powerful antidote for prejudice—one overlooked by most social psychologists.

Yet, this preaching notwithstanding, history is littered with examples in which religion—Christianity included—has provided the justification if not the instigation for atrocious inhumanity to outgroups. Think of the Crusades, the Inquisition, witch hunts, slavery, missionaries' obliteration of native cultures, Northern Ireland, the Middle East; the list is endless. All too often, it seems, religion functions not as a prophetic voice calling the faithful to shed their intolerance and bigotry, but as a mighty fortress of ingroup superiority, one that justifies elitism, ethnocentrism, oppression, and even destruction of those who are different.

Robert Brannon (1970) observed, "Some critics of religion have gone so far as to charge that racial and ethnic intolerance is a natural extension of religious precepts" (p. 42). When one thinks back over the role of religion in Western civilization, this charge does not seem nearly as extreme as Brannon implies. Examples in which religious institutions and doctrines have encouraged racial

