Module 5 Social Issues

Lecture 25
Religion

The variety of religious beliefs and organizations is so immense that scholars have found great difficulty in reaching a generally accepted definition of religion. In the West, most people identify religion with Christianity – a belief in a supreme being, who commends us to behave in a moral fashion on this earth and promise an afterlife to in general terms. First, religion should not be identified with monotheism (belief in one God). Most religions involve many deities. Even in some versions of Christianity there are several figures with sacred qualities: God, Jesus, Mary, the Holy Ghost, angles and saints. In certain religions that are no gods at all.

Second, religion should not be identified with moral prescriptions controlling the behavior of believers-like the commandments that Moses was said to have received from. The idea that the gods are interested in how behave on this earth is alien to many religions. To the ancient Greeks, for example, the gods were largely indifferent to the activities of Humanity,

Third, religion is not necessarily concerned with explaining how the world come to be as it is. In Christianity, the myth of Adam and Eve purports to explain the origin of human existence. And many religions have myths of origin of this sort; but equally, many do not.

Fourth, religion cannot be identified with the supernatural, as intrinsically involving belief in a universe ‘beyond the realm of the sense’. Confucianism, for example, is considered with accepting the natural harmony of the world, not with finding truths that ‘lie behind’ it.

What is religion?

Characteristics that all religions do seem to share are as follows. Religion involves a set of symbols, involving feelings of reverence or awe, and are linked to rituals or ceremonials (such as church services) engaged in by a community of believers. Each of these elements needs some elaboration. Whether singing, eating certain kinds of food - or refraining from doing so - fasting on certain days and so on. Since ritual acts are oriented towards religious symbols, they are usually seen as quite distinct from the habits and procedures of ordinary life. Lighting a candle to honour or placate a god differs completely in its significance from doing so to light a room. Religions rituals are often carried on by involve ceremonials practiced collectively by believers. Regular ceremonials normally occur in special places-churches, temples or the shrines where the ‘miracle’ of the gods drinking milk happened in India.

The existence of collective ceremonial is usually regarded by sociologists as one of the main factors distinguishing religion from magic, although the borderlines are by no means clear-cut. Magic is the influencing of events by the use of potions, chanting or rituals practices. It is generally practice by individuals, not by a community of believers. People often choose to resort to magic in situation of misfortune or danger. Thus Bronislaw Malinowski’s classic study of the Trobriand islanders of the Pacific describes a variety if magical rites performed before any hazardous voyage by canoe (1982). The islanders omit such rites when they are simply going fishing in the safe placid waters of a local lagoon.
Although magical practices have mostly disappeared from modern societies, in situations of danger magic-like superstitions are still common. Many who work in occupation that are dangerous or where chance factors can drastically affect performances—such as miners, deep-sea fishermen or sports players—indulge in small superstitious rituals or carry particular items in times of stress. An example might be a tennis player who insists on wearing a particular ring during big matches. Fortune telling by star signs, based on astrological beliefs which have been inherited from magical ideas in pre modern sciences, still commands a following, although most people do not take it too seriously.

**Varieties of Religions**

In traditional societies, religion usually plays a central part in social life. Religious symbols and ritual are often integrated with material and artistic culture of the society—music, painting or carving, dance, story-telling and literature. In small cultures, there is no professional priesthood, but there are always certain individuals who specialize in knowledge of religious (and often magical) practices. Although, there are various sorts of such specialists, one common type is the shaman (a word originating among North American Indian). A shaman is an individual believed to be able to direct sprites or non-natural forces through ritual means. Shamans are sometimes essentially magicians rather than religious leaders, however, and are often consulted by individuals dissatisfied with what is offered in the religious rituals of the community.

**Totemism and Animism**

Two forms of religions found frequently in smaller cultures are totemism and animism. The word ‘totem’ originated among North American Indian tribes, but has been widely used to refer to species of animals or plants believed to have supernatural powers. Usually each kinship group or clan within a society has its own particular totem, with which various ritual activities are associated. Totemic beliefs might seem alien to those living in industrialized societies, yet in certain relatively minor contexts, symbols similar to those of totemism are familiar—as when a sports team has an animal or plant for its emblem. Mascots are totems.

Animism is a belief in spirits or ghosts, thought to populate the same world as human beings. Such spirits may be seen as either benign or malevolent and many influence human behavior in numerous respects. In some cultures, for example, spirits are believed to cause illness or madness, and may also possess or take over individuals in such a way as to control their behavior. Animistic beliefs are not confined to small cultures, but are found to some degree in many religions settings. In medieval Europe, those believed to be possessed by evil spirits were frequently persecuted as sorcerers or witches.

Small, seemingly ‘simple’ societies frequently have complex systems religious belief. Totemism and animism are more common among these societies than in larger ones, but some small societies have far more common among these societies have far more complex religions. The Nuer of southern Sudan, for instance, described by E.E. Evans-Pritchard, have an elaborate set of theological ideas centre on a ‘high god’ or ‘sky spirits’ (Evans- Pritchard 1956). Religion which incline towards monotheism, however, are found relatively infrequently among smaller traditional cultures. Most are polytheistic—there is a belief in many gods.
Judaism, Christianity and Islam

The three most influential monotheistic religions in world history are Judaism, Christianity and Islam. All originated in the Middle East and each has influenced the others.

Judaism

Judaism is the oldest of the three religions, dating from 1,000 BCE. The early Hebrews were nomads, living in and around ancient Egypt. Their prophets, or religious leaders, partly drew their ideas from existing religious beliefs in the single, but differed in their commitment to a single, almighty God. Most of their neighbors were polytheistic. The Hebrews believed that God demands obedience to strict moral codes, and insisted in their claim to a monopoly of truth, seeing their beliefs as the only true religion (Zeitlin 1984, 1988).

Until the creation of Israel, not long after the end of World War Two, there was no state of which Judaism was the official religion. Jewish communities survived in Europe, North Africa and Asia, although they were frequently persecuted—culminating in the murder of millions of Jews by the Nazis in concentration camps during the war.

Christianity

Many Judaic views were taken over and incorporated as part of the Christianity. Jesus was an orthodox Jew, and Christianity began as a sect of Judaism; it is not clear that Jesus wished to found a distinctive religion. His disciples came to think of him as the Messiah—a Hebrew word meaning ‘the anointed’, the Greek term for which was ‘Christ’—awaited by the Jews. Paul, a Greek speaking Roman citizen, was a major initiator of the spread of Christianity, preaching extensively in Asia Minor and Greece. Although the Christians were at first savagely persecuted, the Emperor Constantine eventually adopted Christianity as the official religion of the Roman Empire. Christianity spread to become a dominant force in Western culture for the next thousands years.

Christianity today commands a greater number of adherents, and is more generally spread across the world, than any other religion. Over a thousand million individuals regards themselves as of theology and church organization, the main branches being Roman Catholicism, Protestantism and Eastern Orthodox.

Islam

The origins of Islam, today the second largest religion in the world, overlap with those of Christianity. Islam derives from the teachings of the prophet Muhammad in the seventh century CE. The single God of Islam, Allah, is believed to hold sway over all human and natural life. The Pillars of Islam are the five essential religious duties of Muslims (as believers in Islam are called). The first is the recitation of the Islamic creed, ‘There is no god but Allah, Muhammad is the apostle of Allah. The second is the saying of formal prayers five times each day, preceded by ceremonial washing. The worshiper at these prayers must always face towards the holy city of Mecca in Saudi Arabia, no matter how far away that is.

The third pillar is the observance of Ramadan, a month of fasting during which no food or drink may be taken during daylight. The fourth is the giving of alms (money to the poor). Set out in Islamic law, which has often been used as a source of taxation by the state. Finally,
there is the expectation that every believer will attempt, at least once, to make a pilgrimage to Mecca. Muslims believe that Allah spoke through earlier — before Muhammad, whose teachings most directly express his will. Islam has come to be very widespread, having some 1,000 million adherents throughout the world. The majority are concentrated in North and East Africa, the Middle East and Pakistan.

The Religions of the Far East

Hinduism

There are major contrasts between Judaism, Christianity and Islam, and the religions of the Far East. The oldest of all the great religions still prominent in the world today is Hinduism, the core beliefs of which date back some six thousand years. Hinduism is a polytheistic religion. It is so internally diverse that some scholars have suggested that it should be regarded as a cluster of related religions rather than a single religious orientation; many local cults and religious practices are linked by a few generally held beliefs. Most Hindus accept the doctrine of reincarnation — the belief that all living beings are part of an eternal process of birth, death and rebirth. A second key feature is the caste system, based on the beliefs that individuals are born into a particular position in a social ritual hierarchy, according to the nature of their activities in previous incarnations. A different set of duties and rituals exists for each caste, and one’s fate in the next life is governed mainly by how well these duties are performed in this one. Hinduism accepts the possibility of numerous different religious standpoints, not drawing a clear line between believers and non-believers. There are over 750 million Hindus, virtually all living on the Indian subcontinent. Hinduism does not seek to convert others into ‘true believers’, unlike Christianity and Islam.

Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism

The ethical religions of the East encompass Buddhism, Confucianism and Taoism. These religions have no gods. Rather, they emphasize ethical ideals that relate the believer to the natural cohesion and unity of the universe.

Buddhism derives from the teachings of Siddhartha Gautama, the Buddha (enlightened one), who was a Hindu prince in a small kingdom in south Nepal in the sixth century BCE. According to the Buddha, human beings can escape the reincarnation cycle by the renunciation of desire. The path of salvation lies in a life of self-discipline and meditation, separated from the tasks of mundane world. The overall objective of Buddhism is the attainment of Nirvana, complete spiritual fulfillment. The Buddha rejected Hindu ritual and the authority of the castes. Like Hinduism, Buddhism tolerates many local variations, including belief in local deities, not insisting on a single view. Buddhism today is a major influence in several states in the Far East, including Thailand, Burma, Sri Lanka, China, Japan and Korea. Confucianism was the basis of the culture of the ruling groups in traditional China. ‘Confucius’ (the Latinized form of the name K’ung Fu-tzu), lived in the sixth century BCE, the same period as Buddha. Like Lao-tzu, the founder of Taoism, Confucius was a teacher, not a religious prophet in the manner of the Middle Eastern religious leaders. Confucius is not seen by his followers as a god, but as ‘the wisest of wise men’. Confucianism seeks to adjust human life to the inner harmony of nature, emphasizing the veneration of ancestors. Taoism shares similar principles, stressing meditation non-violence as means to the higher life. Although some elements survive in the beliefs and practices of
many Chinese, Confucianism and Taoism have lost much of their influence in China as a result of determined opposition from the government.

Theories of Religion

Sociologists’ approaches to religion are strongly influenced by the ideas of the three ‘classical’ sociologists’ theorists: Marx, Durkheim and Weber. None of three was himself religious, and all thought that the significance of religion would decrease in modern times. Each believed that religion is in a fundamental sense an illusion. The advocates of different faiths may be wholly persuaded of the validity of the beliefs they hold and the rituals in which they participate, yet the very diversity of religions and their obvious connection to different types of society, the three thinkers held, make these claims inherently implausible.

Marx and Religion

In spite of his influence on the subject, Karl Marx never studied religion in any detail. His ideas mostly derived from the writings of several early nineteenth-centuries theological and philosophical authors. One of these was Ludwig Feuerbach who wrote a famous work called The Essence of Christianity (1957; originally published 1841). According to Feuerbach, religion consists of ideas and values produced by human beings in the course of their cultural development, but mistakenly projected on to divine forces or gods. Thus the story of the Ten Commandments given to Moses by God is a mythical version of the origin of the moral percepts which govern the lives of Jewish and Christian believers. So long as we do not understand the nature of religious symbols we ourselves have created. Feuerbach argues, we are condemned to be prisoners of history we cannot control. Feuerbach uses the term alienation to refer to the establishing of gods or divine forces distinct from human beings. Humanly created values and ideas come to be seen as the product of alien or separate beings – religious forces and gods. While the effect of alienation have in the past been negative, the understanding of religion as alienation, according to Feuerbach, promises great hope for the future. Once human beings realize that the values projected on to religion are really their own, those values become capable of realization on this earth, rather than being deferred to an afterlife. The powers believed to be possessed by God in Christianity can be appropriated by human beings themselves are imperfect and flawed. However, the potential for love and goodness and the power to control our own lives, Feuerbach believed, are present in human social institution and can be brought to fruition once we understand their true nature. Marx accepted the view that religion represents human self-alienation. It is often believed that Marx was dismissive of religion, but this is far from true. Religion, he writes, is the ‘heart of heartless world’ – a heaven from the harshness of daily reality. In Marx’s view, religion in its traditional form will, and should, disappear yet this is because the positive values embodied in religion can become guiding ideals for improving the lot of humanity on this earth, not because these ideals and values themselves are mistaken. We should not fear the gods we ourselves have created, and we should cease endowing them with values we ourselves can realize. Marx declared, in famous phrase, that religion has been the ‘opium of the people’. Religion defers happiness rewards to the afterlife, teaching the resigned acceptance of existing conditions in this life. Attention is thus diverted away from inequalities and injustices in this world by the promise of what is to come in the next. Religion has a strong ideological element: religion beliefs and values often provide justifications on inequalities of wealth and power. For example, the teaching that ‘the meek shall inherit the earth’ suggests attitudes of humility and non-resistance to oppression.
Durkheim and Religious Ritual

In contrast to Marx, Durkheim spent a good part of his intellectual career studying religion, concentrating particularly on religion in small-scale, traditional societies. Durkheim’s work, The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life, first published in 1912, is perhaps the single most influential study in the sociology of religion (Durkheim 12976). Durkheim does not connect religion primarily with social inequalities or power, but relates it to the overall nature of the institutions of the society. He bases his work on a study of totemism as practiced by Australian Aboriginal societies, and he argues that totemism represents religion in its most ‘elementary’ or simple form—hence the title of this book. As totem, has been mentioned was originally an animal or plant taken as having particular symbolic significance for a group. It is a sacred object, regarded with veneration and surrounded by various ritual activities. Durkheim defines religion in terms of a distinction between the sacred and the profane. Sacred objects and symbols, he holds, are treated as apart from the routine aspects of existence, which are the realm of profane. Eating the totemic animal or plant, except on special ceremonial occasions is usually forbidden, and as a sacred object the totem is believed to have divine properties which separate it completely from other animals that might be hunted, or crops gathered and consumed. Why is totem sacred? According to Durkheim, it is because it is the symbol of the group or community. The reverence which people feel for the totem actually derives from the respect they hold for central social values. In religion, the object of worship is society itself. All religions involved regular ceremonial and ritual activities, in which a group of believers meets together. In collective ceremonials, a sense of group solidarity is affirmed and heightened: Ceremonials take individuals away from the concerns of profane social life into an elevated sphere, in which they feel in contact with higher forces. These higher forces, attributed to totems, divine influences or gods, are really the expression of the influence of the collectivity over the individual. Ceremony and ritual, in Durkheim’s view, are essential to binding the members of groups together. This is why they are found not only in regular situations of worship, but in the various life crises when major social transitions are experienced, for example birth, marriage and death. In virtually all societies, ritual and ceremonial procedures are observed on such occasions. Durkheim reasons that collective ceremonials reaffirm group solidarity at a time when people are forced to adjust to major changes in their lives. Funeral rituals demonstrate that the values of the group outlive the passing of particular individuals, and so provide a means for bereaved people to adjust to their altered circumstances. Mourning is not the spontaneous expression of grief— or, at least, it is only for those personally affected by the death. Mourning is a duty imposed by the groups. In small traditional cultures, Durkheim argued, almost all aspects of life are permitted by religion. Religious ceremonials both originate new ideas and categories of thought, and reaffirm existing values. Religion is not just a series of sentiments and activities; it actually conditions the modes of thinking of individuals in traditional cultures. Even the most basic categories of thought, including how time and space are thought of, were first framed in religious terms. The concept of ‘time’, for instance, was originally derived from counting the intervals involved in religious ceremonials. With the development of modern societies, Durkheim believed, the influence of religion wanes. Scientific thinking increasingly replaces religious explanation, and ceremonial and ritual activities come to occupy only a small part of individuals’ lives. Durkheim argues agrees with Marx that traditional religion— that is, religion involving divine forces or gods— is on the verge of disappearing. ‘The old gods are dead,’ Durkheim writes. Yet he says that there is a sense in which religion, in altered forms, is likely to continue. Even modern societies depend for their cohesion on rituals that reaffirm their values; new ceremonial activities can thus be expected to emerge to replace the old. Durkheim is vague about what these might be, but it seems that
he has in mind the celebration of humanist and political values such as freedom, equality and social cooperation.

**Weber: World Religions and Social Change**

Durkheim based his arguments on a very small range of examples, even though he claims his ideas apply to religion in general. Max Weber, by contrast, embarked on a massive study of religions worldwide. No scholar before or since has undertaken a task of such scope. Most of his attention was concentrated on what he called the world religions – those that have attracted large numbers of believers and decisively affected the course of global history. He made detailed studies of Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism and ancient Judaism (Weber 1951, 1952, 1958, 1963), and in The protestant Ethnic and the Spirit of Capitalism (1976; originally published 1904-5) and elsewhere he wrote extensively about the impact of Christianity on the history of the west. He did not, however, complete his projected study of Islam. Weber's writings on religion differ from those of Durkheim in concentrating on the connection between religion and social change, something to which Durkheim gave little attention. They contrast with the work of Marx because Weber argues that religion is not necessarily a conservative force; on the contrary, religiously inspired movements have often produced dramatic social transformations. Thus Protestantism – particularly Puritanism – was the source of the capitalistic outlook found in the modern West, the early entrepreneurs were mostly Calvinists. Their drive to succeed, which helped initiate Western economic development, was originally prompted by desire to serve God. Material success was for them a sign of divine favor. Weber saw his research on the world religions as a single project. His discussion of the impact of Protestantism on the development of the West is a part of comprehensive attempt to understand the influence of religion on social and economic life in varying cultures. Analyzing the eastern religions, Weber concluded that they provided insuperable barriers to the development of industrial capitalism, such as took place in the West. This is not because the non-Western civilizations are backward; they have simply accepted values different from those which came to predominant in Europe. In traditional China and India, Weber pointed out, there was at certain periods a significant development of commerce, manufacture and urbanism, but these did not generate the radical patterns of social change involved in the rise of industrial capitalism in the West. Religion was a major influence in inhibiting such change. For example, Hinduism is what Weber called an ‘other-worldly’ religion. That is to say its highest values stress escape from the toils of the material world to a higher plane of spiritual existence. The religious feelings and motivations produced by Hinduism do not focus on controlling or shaping the material world. On the contrary, Hinduism sees material reality as a veil hiding the true concerns to which human kind should be oriented. Confucianism also acted to direct effort away from economic development, as this came to be understood in the West, emphasizing harmony with the world rather than promoting active mastery of it. Weber regarded Christianity as a salvation religion, involving the belief that human beings can be saved if they adopt the beliefs of the religion and follow its moral tenets. The notions of sin and of being rescued from sinfulness by God’s grace are important here. They generate a tension and an emotional dynamism essentially absent from the eastern religions. Salvation religions have a ‘revolutionary’ aspect. While the religions of the East cultivate an attitude of passivity in the believer towards the existing order, Christianity involves a constant struggle against sin, and hence can stimulate revolt against the existing order of things. Religious leaders – like Jesus – arise, who interpret existing doctrines in such a way as to challenge the prevailing power structure.
Marx, Durkheim and Weber each identified some important general characteristics of religion, and in some ways their views complement one another. Marx was right to claim that religion often has ideological implications, serving to justify the interests of ruling groups at the expense of others: there are innumerable instances of this in history. Yet Weber was certainly correct to emphasize the unsettling, and often revolutionary, impact of religious ideals on pre-established social orders. Durkheim emphasized on the role of religion in promoting social cohesion.

References


Questions

1. What is meant by religion?
2. What are the different forms of religion?
3. Write a note on a polytheistic form of religion.
4. Explain the monotheistic religions.
5. How does Weber view world religions and social change?
6. Explain Marx’s and Durkheim’s perspective of religion.