Module 2 Institutions

Lecture 8
Religion

The sociology of religion combines demographic analysis of religious bodies with attempts to understand the different components of religiosity. Also, some sociological studies of religion are ethnographic in nature; they attempt to understand religious behavior from the viewpoint of the adherents of the religion.

It is important to point out at the beginning of this chapter that sociologists study religion not to disprove or normatively evaluate it but rather to understand it. However, and this is a contentious point in the social scientific study of religion, it is also often the case that studying religion from this perspective can challenge people's religious beliefs because the social scientific study of religion provides alternative explanations for many components of religious experience (e.g., the sources of conversion experiences; see Batson, Schoenrade, and Ventis 1993).

Definitions of Religion

The starting point for any study of religion should begin with a definition of the concept. This is particularly important in the study of religion because the definition determines which groups will be included in the analysis. Three general definitions have been proposed, each of which will be discussed briefly. Each definition has its merits and detriments, but what one often finds is that the definition of religion employed by a particular researcher or in the investigation of a particular topic depends on the question being asked.

Sacred versus Profane

Perhaps the most well known definition of religion is that provided by Emile Durkheim (1995). Durkheim argued that the definition of religion hinged on the distinction between things that are sacred (set apart from daily life) and things that are profane (everyday, mundane elements of society). The sacred elements of social life are what make up religion.

For example, the Torah in Judaism is sacred and treated with reverence and respect. The reverential treatment of the Torah would be contrasted with all sorts of more mundane things like cars or toys, which, for most people, are not considered sacred. Yet, the acute reader will be quick to point out that for some, cars (and even toys) are considered sacred and treated almost as reverentially as the Torah is treated in Judaism. This introduces one of the most significant criticisms of this definition - the typology can include things that are not traditionally understood to be religious (like cars or toys). As a result, the definition is extremely broad and can encompass substantial elements of social life. For instance, while most people in the United States would not consider their nationalism to be religious, they do hold the flag, the nation's capitol, and other national monuments to be sacred. Under this definition, nationalism would be considered religion.
Religion as Existential Questioning

Another common definition of religion among social scientists (particularly social psychologists) views religion as any attempt to answer existential questions (e.g., 'Is there life after death?'; see Batson, Scheonrade, and Ventis 1993). This definition casts religion in a functional light as it is seen as serving a specific purpose in society. As is the case with the sacred/profane typology, this definition is also often critiqued for being broad and overly encompassing. For instance, using this definition, someone who attends religious services weekly but makes no attempt to answer existential questions would not be considered religious. At the other extreme, an atheist who believes that existence ends with physical death, would be considered religious because he/she has attempted to answer a key existential question.

Religion as Supernature

The third social scientific definition views religion as the collective beliefs and rituals of a group relating to supernature (Tylor 1976). This view of religion draws a sometimes ambiguous line between beliefs and rituals relating to empirical, definable phenomena and those relating to undefinable or unobservable phenomena, such as spirits, god(s), and angels. This definition is not without its problems as well, as some argue it can also include atheists who have a specific position against the existence of a god (or gods). Yet because the beliefs and rituals are understood to be shared by a group, this definition could be argued to exclude atheists. Despite the problems with this last definition, it does most closely adhere to the traditional (and popular) view of what constitutes a religion.

The Church-Sect Typology

Having defined religion, we now move to one of the most common classification schemes employed in sociology for differentiating between different types of religions. This scheme has its origins in the work of Max Weber, but has seen numerous contributions since then. The basic idea is that there is a continuum along which religions fall, ranging from the protest-like orientation of sects to the equilibrium maintaining churches. Along this continuum are several additional types, each of which will be discussed in turn. The reader may notice that many of the labels for the types of religion are commonly employed by non-sociologists to refer to religions and tend to be used interchangeably. Sociologists, when speaking technically, will not use these labels interchangeably as they are designations for religions with very specific characteristics.

Before describing these different religions, it is important for the reader to understand that these classifications are a good example of what sociologists refer to as ideal types. Ideal types are pure examples of the categories. Because there is significant variation in each religion, how closely an individual religion actually adheres to their ideal type classification will vary. Even so, the classification scheme is useful as it also outlines a sort of developmental process for religions.

Church and Ecclesia
The first type of religion is the church. The church classification describes religions that are all-embracing of religious expression in a society. Religions of this type are the guardians of religion for all members of the societies in which they are located and tolerate no religious competition. They also strive to provide an all-encompassing worldview for their adherents and are typically enmeshed with the political and economic structures of society.

Johnstone (1997) provides the following six characteristics of churches:

(a) claim universality, include all members of the society within their ranks, and have a strong tendency to equate 'citizenship' with 'membership
(b) exercise religious monopoloy and try to eliminate religious competition
(c) very closely allied with the state and secular powers - frequently there is overlapping of responsibilities and much mutual reinforcement
(d) extensively organized as a hierarchical bureaucratic institution with a complex division of labour
(e) employ professional, full-time clergy who possess the appropriate credentials of education and formal ordination
(f) almost by definition gain new members through natural reproduction and the socialization of children into the ranks
(g) allow for diversity by creating different groups within the church (e.g., orders of nuns or monks) rather than through the formation of new religions.

The classical example of a church is the Roman Catholic Church, especially in the past. Today, the Roman Catholic Church has been forced into the denomination category because of religious pluralism or competition among religions. This is especially true of Catholicism in the United States. The change from a church to a denomination is still underway in many Latin American countries where the majority of citizens remain Catholics.

A slight modification of the church type is that of ecclesia (von Wiese 1932). Ecclesias include the above characteristics of churches with the exception that they are generally less successful at garnering absolute adherence among all of the members of the society and are not the sole religious body. The state churches of some European countries would fit this type.

**Denominations**

The denomination lies between the church and the sect on the continuum. Denominations come into existence when churches lose their religious monopoly in a society. A denomination is one religion among many. When churches and/or sects become denominations, there are also some changes in their characteristics. Johnstone provides the following eight characteristics of denominations:

(a) similar to churches, but unlike sects, in being on relatively good terms with the state and secular powers and may even attempt to influence government at times
(b) maintain at least tolerant and usually fairly friendly relationships with other denominations in a context of religious pluralism
(c) rely primarily on birth for membership increase, though it will also accept converts; some even actively pursue evangelization
(d) accept the principle of at least modestly changing doctrine and practice and tolerate some theological diversity and dispute
(e) follow a fairly routinized ritual and worship service that explicitly discourages spontaneous emotional expression
(f) train and employ professional clergy who must meet formal requirements for certification
(g) accept less extensive involvement from members than do sects, but more involvement than churches
(h) often draw disproportionately from the middle and upper classes of society

**Sects**

*Sects* are newly formed religious groups that form to protest elements of their parent religion (generally a denomination). Their motivation tends to be situated in accusations of apostasy or heresy in the parent denomination; they are often decrying liberal trends in denominational development and advocating a return to *true* religion.

Interestingly, leaders of sectarian movements (i.e., the formation of a new sect) tend to come from a lower socio-economic class than the members of the parent denomination, a component of sect development that is not entirely understood. Most scholars believe that when sect formation does involve social class distinctions they involve an attempt to compensate for deficiencies in lower social status. An often seen result of such factors is the incorporation into the theology of the new sect a distaste for the adornments of the wealthy (e.g., jewelry or other signs of wealth).

Another interesting fact about sects is that after their formation, they can take only three paths – dissolution, institutionalization, or eventual development into a denomination. If the sect withers in membership, it will dissolve. If the membership increases, the sect is forced to adopt the characteristics of denominations in order to maintain order (e.g., bureaucracy, explicit doctrine, etc.). And even if the membership does not grow or grows slowly, norms will develop to govern group activities and behaviour. The development of norms results in a decrease in spontaneity, which is often one of the primary attractions of sects. The adoption of denomination-like characteristics can either turn the sect into a full-blown denomination or, if a conscious effort is made to maintain some of the spontaneity and protest components of sects, an institutionalized sect can result. Institutionalized sects are halfway between sects and denominations on the continuum of religious development. They have a mixture of sect-like and denomination-like characteristics. Examples include: Hutterites and the Amish.

**Cults or New Religious Movements**

*Cults* are, like sects, new religious groups. But, unlike sects, they can form without breaking off from another religious group (though they often do). The characteristic that most distinguishes cults from sects is that they are not advocating a return to *pure* religion but rather the embracement of something new or something that has been completely lost or forgotten (e.g., lost scripture or new prophecy). Cults are also more likely to be led by charismatic leaders than are other religious groups and the charismatic leaders tend to be the individuals who bring forth the new or lost component that is the focal element of the cult (e.g., The Book of Mormon).
Cults, like sects, often integrate elements of existing religious theologies, but cults tend to create more esoteric theologies from many sources. Cults emphasize the individual and individual peace. Cults also tend to attract the socially disenchanted or unattached (though this is not always the case; see Aho 1990 and Barker 1984). Cults tend to be located in urban centers where they can draw upon large populations for membership. Finally, cults tend to be transitory as they often dissolve upon the death or discrediting of their founder and charismatic leader.

Cults, like sects, can develop into denominations. As cults grow, they bureaucratize and develop many of the characteristics of denominations. Some scholars are hesitant to grant cults denominational status because many cults maintain their more esoteric characteristics (e.g., Temple Worship among Mormons). But given their closer semblance to denominations than to the cult type, it is more accurate to describe them as denominations.

Finally, it should be noted that there is a push in the social scientific study of religion to begin referring to cults as New Religious Movements or NRMs. The reasoning behind this is because cult has made its way into popular language as a derogatory label rather than as a specific type of religious group. Most religious people would do well to remember the social scientific meaning of the word cult and, in most cases, realize that three of the major world religions originated as cults, including: Islam, Christianity, and Buddhism.

Theories of Religion

Many of the early sociological theorists (e.g., Marx and Durkheim) proposed theories attempting to explain religion. In addition to these classical approaches to understanding religion, one modern explanation for the continued high levels of religiosity will be proposed along with a social psychological explanation that will attempt to explain the continued attraction of religion. These theories approach religion from slightly different perspectives, trying to explain: (i) the function of religion in society; (ii) the role of religion in the life of the individual; and (iii) the nature (and origin) of religion.

Structural-Functional

The Structural-Functional approach to religion has its roots in Emile Durkheim's work on religion (1912). Durkheim argued that religion is, in a sense, the celebration and even (self-) worship of human society. Given this approach, Durkheim proposed that religion has three major functions in society:

(a) Social cohesion - religion helps maintain social solidarity through shared rituals and beliefs
(b) Social control - religious based morals and norms help maintain conformity and control in society; religion can also legitimize the political system
(c) Providing meaning and purpose - religion can provide answers to existential questions (see the social-psychological approach below).

The primary criticism of the structural-functional approach to religion is that it overlooks religion's dysfunctions. For instance, religion can be used to justify terrorism and violence (Juergensmeyer 2000). Religion has often been the justification of and motivation for war. In one sense, this still fits the structural-functional approach as it provides social cohesion among the members of one party in a conflict (e.g., the social cohesion among the members
of a terrorist group is high), but in a broader sense, religion is obviously resulting in conflict, not the resolution of such.

**Social-Conflict**

The social-conflict approach is rooted in Marx's analysis of capitalism. According to Marx, religion plays a significant role in maintaining the status quo. Marx argued that religion was actually a tool of the bourgeoisie to keep the proletariat content. Marx argued that religion is able to do this by promising rewards in the after-life rather than in this life. It is in this sense that Marx said, “Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the feeling of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless circumstances. It is the opium of the people... The abolition of religion as the illusory happiness of the people is the demand for their real happiness” (Marx 2000: 72).

What Marx meant is that it would be necessary for the proletariat to throw off religion and its deceit about *other-worldly* rewards in order for the proletariat to rise up against the bourgeoisie and gain control over the means of production so they could realize *this-worldly* rewards. Thus, the social-conflict approach to religion highlights how it functions to maintain social inequality by providing a worldview that justifies oppression.

It should be reiterated here that Marx’s approach to sociology was critical in the sense that it advocated change (in contrast to the *knowledge for knowledge’s sake* approach). Because criticism of the system in place when he was writing was inherent in Marx's approach, he took a particular stand on the existence of religion, namely, that it should be done away with.

**Social Constructionist**

The *social constructionist* approach to religion presents a naturalistic explanation of the origins of religion. Berger (1967) laid a framework for this approach, "Religion is the human enterprise by which a sacred cosmos is established. Putting differently, religion is cosmization in a sacred mode. Use of the word sacred in this context refers to a quality of mysterious and awesome power, other than man and yet related to him, which is believed to reside in certain objects of experience" (p. 25). In other words, for the social constructionist, religion is not created by (or for) supernatural beings but rather is the result of societies delineating certain elements of society as sacred. In the social constructionist frame of mind, these elements of society are then objectified in society so they seem to take on an existence of their own. As a result, they can then act back on the individual (e.g., the influence of a religion on the individual).

Another important element of religion discussed by Berger in his outline of the social constructionist approach is the idea of *plausibility structures*. According to Berger, The reality of the Christian world depends upon the presence of social structures within which this reality is taken for granted and within which successive generations of individuals are socialized in such a way that this world will be real to them. When this plausibility structure loses its intactness or continuity, the Christian world begins to totter and its reality ceases to impose itself as self-evident truth. (p. 46)

In short, plausibility structures are the societal elements that provide the support for a set of beliefs (not necessarily religious), including people, institutions, and the processes by which the beliefs are spread, e.g. socialization. Another important element to consider of plausibility structures is mentioned by Berger, "When an entire society serves as the plausibility structure
for a religiously legitimated world, all the important social processes within it serve to confirm and reconfirm the reality of this world” (p. 47). In other words, in certain societies, every component of society functions to reinforce the belief system. A good example of this may be Iran, where everything is structured to reinforce the Islamic faith as reality.

**Religious Pluralism**

Religious pluralism is the belief that one can overcome religious differences between different religions and denominational conflicts within the same religion. For most religious traditions, religious pluralism is essentially based on a non-literal view of one's religious traditions, allowing for respect to be engendered between different traditions on core principles rather than more marginal issues. It is perhaps summarized as an attitude which rejects focus on immaterial differences and instead gives respect to those beliefs held in common.

The existence of religious pluralism depends on the existence of freedom of religion. Freedom of religion is when different religions of a particular region possess the same rights of worship and public expression. Freedom of religion is consequently weakened when one religion is given rights or privileges denied to others, as in certain European countries where Roman Catholicism or regional forms of Protestantism have special status. (For example see the Lateran Treaty and Church of England; also, in Saudi Arabia the public practice of religions other than Islam is forbidden.) Religious freedom has not existed at all in some communist countries where the state restricts or prevents the public expression of religious belief and may even actively persecute individual religions.

Religious Pluralism has also been argued to be a factor in the continued existence of religion in the US. This theoretical approach (Moore 1994) proposes that because no religion was guaranteed a monopoly in the US, religious pluralism led to the conversion of religions in the US into capitalist organizations. As a result, religions are now better understood as capitalist corporations peddling their wares in a highly competitive market than they are as monopolistic Churches like Roman Catholicism was prior to The Reformation (or, some might argue, still is in Latin America) or as small, fervent, protest-like sects are. The result of religious pluralism is, like capitalism generally in the U.S., a consumer attitude: people consume religion like they do other goods. Because religions are good at marketing themselves as the providers of social psychological compensators, they have been successful.

**Social-Psychological**

The primary social-psychological reason why religion continues to exist is because it answers existential questions that are difficult, if not impossible, to address scientifically. For instance, science cannot address the question of what happens when someone dies other than to provide a biological explanation (i.e., the body's cells eventually die due to lack of nutrition, the body then decomposes, etc.). Science is also unable to address the question of a higher purpose in life other than simply to reproduce. Finally, science cannot disprove or prove the existence of a higher being. Each of these existential components is discussed below in greater detail.

Studies have found that fear is a factor in religious conversion. Altemeyer and Hunsberger (1997), in their book *Amazing Conversions,* note that one of the primary motivations for people to seek religion was fear of the the unknown; specifically, fear of the after-life and
what it portends. While fear likely does not motivate all religious people, it certainly is a factor for some. Religion can provide a non-falsifiable answer to the question of what happens after people die. Such answers can provide comfort for individuals who want to know what will happen when they die.

Religion providing a purpose in life was also a motivation found by Altemeyer and Hunsberger (1997) in their analysis of religious converts. Batson et. al. (1993) and Spilka, Hunsberger, Gorsuch, and Hood (2003) also point to this factor as an explanation for the continued interest in religiosity. Interestingly, Diener (1999), in his research on Subjective Well-Being (SWB) notes that one of the keys to high SWB (a.k.a. happiness) is a goal or purpose in life. However, he introduces a caveat that is particularly telling for religious individuals for the most positive impact on SWB, goals should be difficult but attainable. Difficult but attainable is a good description of salvation for religious people. People have to work toward salvation, but they believe it can be achieved. Thus, religion can provide a goal and purpose in life for people who believe they need one.

Belief in God is attributable to a combination of the above factors (i.e., God's existence alleviates fear of death and provides meaning), but is also informed by a discussion of socialization. The biggest predictor of adult religiosity is parental religiosity; if a person's parents were religious when she was a child, she is likely to be religious when she grows up. Children are socialized into religion by their parents and their peers and, as a result, they tend to stay in religions. Alternatively, children raised in secular homes tend not to convert to religion. This is the underlying premise of Altemeyer and Hunsberger's (1997) main thesis they found some interesting cases where just the opposite seemed to happen; secular people converted to religion and religious people became secular. Despite these rare exceptions, the process of socialization is certainly a significant factor in the continued existence of religion.

Combined, these three social-psychological components explain, with the help of religious pluralism, the continued high levels of religiosity in the U.S. People are afraid of things they do not understand (death), they feel they need a purpose in life to be happy, and they are socialized into religion and believing in God by parents.

References


Questions

1. Explain the distinction between sacred and profane.

2. ‘Religion is an attempt to explain existential question.’ Explain.

3. Explain the distinction between a denomination and a sect.

4. What is the role of cults or new religious movements?
5. Elaborately explain the various theories of religion.