Module 2 Institutions

Lecture 9
Religion and Significant Social Factors

World Religions and Religious History

If one were to ask any sociologist of religion which are the world religions, they would likely give the standard answer that there are five world religions:

- Christianity
- Hinduism
- Islam
- Buddhism
- Judaism

Traditionally, these have been considered world religions due to their size and/or influence on society. A detailed description of these religions is beyond the scope of this chapter and the interested reader is encouraged to follow the above links for more information.

One note is, however, in order concerning these religious groups. The classification of these groups as world religions is, like all classifications, artificial. Considering the remarkable dissimilarity between these five religious bodies, that they are grouped together at all is remarkable. Three are religions of the book and can be practiced somewhat distinctly from one’s primary cultural identity (e.g., being an American and Episcopalian), while two are better understood as synonymous with culture (Buddhism and Hinduism). Additionally, the religions of the book have numerous branches, some so dissimilar that there is more contention within the world religions than between them (e.g., Mormons vs. fundamentalist Christians, Catholics vs. Episcopalians). Finally, while four of these religious groups are very populous, Judaism is not. In short, classification as a world religion seems a little arbitrary. Even so, most people should make an effort to familiarize themselves with these religious groups to facilitate understanding.

Religion and Other Social Factors

Religion and Gender

Batson et. al. (1993) provide a clear summary of the differences in religiosity between men and women:

There is considerable evidence that women are more likely to be interested and involved in religion than men. Women rate their religious beliefs as important more than do men, and they are more likely to report having had a religious or mystical experience... More women than men report having attended religious services in the past week (46% compared with 33%); more women hold membership in a church or synagogue (74% compared with 63%); and more women report watching religious programs (53% compared with 44%). Women are more likely than men to read the Bible at least monthly (56% compared with
41%) and to report having "a great deal of confidence" in organized religion (62% compared with 52%). Among Christian denominations, as one moves away from the established, traditional churches (e.g., Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Episcopal) toward newer, less traditional ones (e.g., Assembly of God, Pentecostal) the proportion of women members relative to men increases... In sum, although the differences are not always large, they are remarkably consistent: Women appear to be more religious-than-men (p. 33).

One explanation for the greater involvement of women in religion is socialization. Batson et. al. (1993:37) discuss the idea that women may be socialized into roles in which religion is more highly emphasized than it is in men's roles.

Religion and Race

Batson et. al. (1993:38) provide a clear summary of differences in religiosity by race (limited presently to just blacks and whites). They include five distinctions in their discussion: (i) attend religious services, (ii) hold traditional religious beliefs, (iii) feel strongly about your religious beliefs, (iv) report having had religious experiences, and (v) consider religion to be important in your life - both when you were growing up and as an adult.

Batson et. al. (1993) attribute the differences in religiosity between blacks and whites to the role religious institutions have played among blacks. Religion has provided a sense of community and support for blacks and was also extremely influential in the Civil Rights Movement (see Morris 1984). As a result, religion has a more prominent role in the day-to-day lives of different races.

Religion and Class

Socioeconomic status (SES) or class tends to be associated more with how religion is practiced rather than degree of religiosity (i.e., very religious vs. not very religious). Members of lower classes tend to associate with more fundamentalist religions and sect-like groups. Members of the middle class tend to belong to more formal churches.

Religion and Education

An important study published in 1997 by Johnson draws a particularly clear picture of the relationship between religion and education. Johnson found a dichotomization of religiosity as a result of college education. Those who make it through college with their religious beliefs intact tend to be more devout than those who do not attend college to begin with yet remain religious. On the other side, those who don't make it through college with their religious beliefs intact end up far less orthodox and are more likely to disavow religion altogether. The relationship between education and religiosity is a dichotomization that college education strengthens both religiosity and irreligiosity, it just depends on where you end up. Johnson’s finding is particularly insightful in light of the social psychological theory of cognitive dissonance, which argues that religious people will (at least initially) reinforce their beliefs in light of disconfirming evidence.
Religion and Health

According to Batson et. al. (1993:240-290), the relationship between religion and mental health is highly nuanced. In order to understand this nuanced relationship, it is necessary to clarify the different types of religiosity Batson et. al. are studying. Batson et. al. distinguish between three types of religiosity. These types or orientations stem from the work of Gordon Allport who distinguished two types of religiosity and provided their corresponding labels: intrinsic and extrinsic religiosity. Extrinsic religiosity refers to people who use religion as a means to an end (e.g., social contacts). Intrinsic religiosity refers to people who see religion as the end (e.g., religion is the answer to life's questions). Batson et. al. add a third “quest” religiosity. Quest religiosity refers to the religious seeker who constantly asks questions and may not believe there are any clear answers to them.

If one does not take into consideration the different types of religiosity (i.e., extrinsic, intrinsic, and quest), religion tends to be associated with poorer mental health (p. 240). Specifically, Batson et. al. find a negative relationship between religion and three components of mental health, “personal competence and control, self-acceptance or self-actualization, and openmindedness and flexibility” (p. 240).

However, if one does take into consideration the different types of religiosity, then intrinsic and quest oriented individuals tend to see mental health benefits from their religious involvement. Extrinsic-oriented individuals, on the other hand, find that their religious involvement results in a negative influence on their mental health (p. 289).

The Future of Religion

Despite the claims of many classical theorists and sociologists, religion continues to play a vital role in the lives of individuals. In America, for example, church attendance has remained relatively stable in the past 40 years. In Africa and South America, the emergence of Christianity has occurred at a startling rate. While Africa could claim roughly 10 million Christians in 1900, recent estimates put that number closer to 200 million. The rise of Islam as a major world religion, especially its newfound influence in the West, is another significant development. In light of these developments, sociologists have been forced to reconsider the early proclamations of the demise of religion. In addition to discussing secularization and how the theory has been modified due to the continued existence of religion, religious fundamentalism is briefly touched upon as it is playing a significant role in society today.

Secularization

Secularization is a varied term with multiple definitions and levels of meaning. It should also be noted that in addition to multiple definitions, secularization is both a theory and a process.

Putting it in perspective, it is meant that some scholars (e.g. Marx, Freud, Weber and Durkheim) believed that as society modernized it would also see a decline in levels of religiosity. This understanding of classical secularization theory is currently being refined and modified (see discussion below).
The ‘process’ component of secularization would refer to how the theory is actualized. It is in this sense that secularization has multiple definitions. The most common meaning is in reference to the decline of levels of religiosity in society, but this is a broad and diffuse meaning that should be clarified by referring to one of the more specific meanings outlined below.

Sommerville (1998) outlined six (6) uses of the term secularization in the scientific literature. The first five are more along the lines of definitions while the sixth application of the term is more of a ‘clarification of use’ issue:

(a) When discussing social structures, secularization can refer to differentiation. Differentiation (or specialization) is a reference to the increasing division of labor and occupational specialization in society. While some might consider this a foray into social progress, few would argue that modern societies are less differentiated than more primitive, tribal societies (following the work of Gerhard Emmanuel Lenski).

(b) When discussing institutions, secularization can refer to the transformation of an institution that had once been considered religious in character into something not thought of as religious. A good example of this type of secularization (and differentiation, for that matter) is the transition of Harvard University from a predominantly religious institution into a secular institution (with a divinity school now housing the religious element illustrating differentiation).

(c) When discussing activities, secularization refers to the transfer of activities from institutions of a religious nature to others without that character. While the trend toward government assistance in social welfare seems to be reversing in recent years, for much of the 20th century activities that had been in the religious domain (e.g. soup kitchens) were slowly moving into the secular (or a-religious) realm, often that of government.

(d) When discussing mentalities, secularization can refer to the transition from ultimate concerns to proximate concerns. This is the most common understanding and usage of the term at the individual level and refers specifically to personal religious decline or movement toward a secular lifestyle.

(e) When discussing populations, secularization can refer to a societal decline in levels of religiosity (as opposed to the individual-level secularization of definition four). It should be noted that this understanding of secularization is distinct from definition mentioned in (a) in that it refers specifically to religious decline rather than societal differentiation. A clear example of this definition of secularization would be the declining religious affiliations in much of modern Europe.

(f) When discussing religion generally, secularization can only be used unambiguously when referring to religion in a generic sense. For example, to argue that Christianity is ‘secularizing’ is not clear unless one specifies exactly which elements of which version of Christianity are being discussed. What’s more, depending on the venue of the discussion, these elements of Christianity may not be recognized by other ‘Christian’ groups as elements of their version of Christianity. Thus, if you are interested in discussing religious decline within a specific denomination or religion, you need to specify which elements of that specific group you believe are declining, as Christianity is too variably defined to allow for generalizations for a specific denomination.
Current Issues in the Study of Secularization

At present, secularization (as understood in definition five above) is being debated in the sociology of religion. Some scholars (e.g., Rodney Stark) have argued that levels of religiosity are not declining (though their argument tends to be limited to the U.S., an admitted anomaly in the developed world). As there appears to be some merit to this position, other scholars (e.g., Mark Chaves) have countered by introducing the idea of neo-secularization, which broadens the definition of individual level religious decline by arguing that secularization can also refer to the decline of religious authority. In other words, rather than using a-religious apostates as the solitary measure of a population's secularity, neo-secularization theory argues that individuals are increasingly looking outside of religion for authoritative positions on different topics.

Religious Fundamentalism

Fundamentalism describes a movement to return to what is considered the defining or founding principles of a religion. It has especially come to refer to any religious enclave that intentionally resists identification with the larger religious group in which it originally arose, on the basis that fundamental principles upon which the larger religious group is supposedly founded have become corrupt or displaced by alternative principles hostile to its identity. A full analysis of what constitutes religious fundamentalism is beyond the scope of this lecture.

The destruction of the World Trade Centers in 2001 was inspired by fundamentalist religion. Religious fundamentalism is of great importance to sociologists because of its increasingly prominent role in social life, especially politics. Kenneth Wald (2003) points out how religious fundamentalism can be detrimental to politics, specifically a democratic system. The fundamentalist approach to politics can hurt a democratic system because of fundamentalists’ unwillingness to compromise. Religious fundamentalists tend to take the view that ‘God said it, so it will have to be this way.’ Because anything short of God’s will is unacceptable, religious fundamentalists don't allow for a middle ground – which is a vital element of the democratic process.

What the future of religious fundamentalism holds for human society is unknown, but because of the impact of this particular religious approach on society today, religious fundamentalism warrants continued study.

References


Questions

1. What is the significance of the classification of the five religious groups as ‘world religions’?
2. Explain the correlation between religion and gender.
3. Explain the correlation between religion and class
4. Explain the correlation between religion and race
5. Explain the correlation between religion and health and education.
6. What is meant by secularization? What are the issues involved in it?
7. Explain the concept of religious fundamentalism.