

Religion and Society: Sociological Perspective

Religion is an important aspect of human society. It influences the way people interact with each other, as well as with the natural and supernatural world. **Religion also reflects the values, norms, and beliefs of a society, and shapes its culture and identity.** Therefore, religion is an important subject matter for sociology, which is the scientific study of human society.

Sociologists have different perspectives and theories on religion, depending on their interests and approaches. Some sociologists are interested in explaining the origin and evolution of religion, and how it relates to the development of human civilization. Some sociologists are interested in explaining the functions and dysfunctions of religion, and how it affects the social order and change. Some sociologists are interested in explaining the diversity and complexity of religion, and how it interacts with other social institutions and phenomena.

In this article, we will briefly discuss some of the important theories of religion from a sociological perspective, and highlight their main arguments and contributions.

Theories of the Origin and Evolution of Religion

Animism: The Simplest form of Religion in Simplistic Societies

Some sociologists have tried to explain the origin and evolution of religion, by tracing its first and simplest form in human history. They have used various methods and sources, such as anthropology, psychology, linguistics, and comparative religion, to support their claims.

One of the earliest theories of the origin and evolution of religion was proposed by **Edward Tylor and Herbert Spencer**, who argued that **animism** is the first and simplest form of religion.

Animism refers to the belief that everything in nature has a soul or spirit, and that the souls of the dead ancestors can influence the living. Tylor and Spencer claimed that animism emerged from the primitive experiences and observations of dreams, shadows, and echoes, which led people to assume the existence of a separate and invisible realm of spirits.

They also claimed that animism evolved into more complex forms of religion, such as polytheism and monotheism, as human society became more advanced and rational.

Naturism: Max Muller's idea of Religion

Another theory of the origin and evolution of religion was proposed by Max Muller, who argued that **naturism** is the first and simplest form of religion. Naturism refers to the worship of the forces of nature, such as the sun, the moon, the rivers, and the oceans.

Muller claimed that naturism emerged from the primitive emotions and expressions of awe, fear, and gratitude, which led people to personify and venerate the natural phenomena. He also claimed that naturism evolved into more abstract and ethical forms of religion, such as henotheism and monotheism, as human language and thought became more refined and sophisticated.

Theories of the Functions and Dysfunctions of Religion

Some sociologists have tried to explain the functions and dysfunctions of religion, by analyzing its effects on the social structure and social change. They have used various concepts and frameworks, such as functionalism, conflict theory, and social action theory, to support their claims.

Emile Durkheim and Totemism: The Sacred and the Profane

One of the most systematic and influential theories of the functions and dysfunctions of religion was proposed by Emile Durkheim, who argued that **totemism** is the simplest form of religion. Totemism refers to the worship of a sacred symbol, which can be an animal, a plant, a flag, or anything else.

Durkheim claimed that totemism emerged from the social division of labor, which led people to classify themselves and their world into two categories: the sacred and the profane. He also claimed that totemism performed various functions for the society, such as creating social solidarity, regulating social norms, and providing social meaning.

Durkheim rejected the theories of Tylor, Spencer, and Muller, and criticized them for being unscientific and biased. He argued that sociology is a science that does not believe in spirits or souls, and that religion cannot be rooted in fear or ignorance.

He argued that religion is associated with an attitude of awe and reverence, and that it reflects the collective consciousness of the society. He argued that the sacred symbol, or the totem, represents the society itself, and that by worshipping

it, people are actually worshipping their society. He argued that society is the real object of worship, and that religion is the expression of social reality.

According to Durkheim, every society divides its world into two parts: the sacred and the profane. Religion emerges from this distinction between the sacred and the profane.

Religion can be defined as a unified system of beliefs and practices related to the sacred symbol. The beliefs legitimize religion, whereas the practices concretize religion.

According to Durkheim, nothing is sacred by itself. Sacredness is a quality that can be superimposed by the society on any object. Once a sacred object is created, the society expects its members to show an attitude of awe and reverence.

Since, in simple society, these sacred symbols represent the society only, while worshipping them, people are actually worshipping their society. Society is sacred, whereas man is profane. Hence, society is the real object of worship.

In simple, small-scale society, a common religion is followed. People have common beliefs and practices. It brings the members of the society closer to each other, leading to solidarity. Hence, religion is functional.

However, Durkheim also acknowledged that religion can have negative effects on the society, such as causing social conflicts, inhibiting social progress, and alienating individuals.

He argued that religion can become dysfunctional when it loses its relevance and legitimacy, and when it fails to adapt to the changing social conditions and demands.

Bronislaw Malinowski and Talcott Parsons : Religion and Anxiety

Other sociologists who also proposed functionalist theories of religion were Bronislaw Malinowski and Talcott Parsons, who argued that religion performs various functions for the individual and the society, such as providing emotional support, coping with stress, integrating values, and facilitating socialization.

However, they did not accept Durkheim's view that society is the only object of worship. They accepted the fact that religion results in solidarity, but they also recognized the role of religion in addressing the individual needs and problems.

According to Malinowski, in human life, anxieties do exist. Because of this, the sense of insecurity remains high. As long as this anxiety and insecurity remain in life, religion is bound to exist. It is mainly because religion relieves anxiety. The

belief in the supernatural force ensures that there is someone to take care of the people in any unforeseen situation. According to Malinowski, birth, death, etc. serve as disruptive forces in life. They lead to anxiety. Religions and the rituals associated with them may relieve some anxieties.

On the other hand, according to Parsons, religion can resolve the mysteries of life. Hence, as long as there are mysteries in life, religion is bound to exist. Whereas science fails to answer something, religion comes to its rescue. Religion can answer the unanswerable. For example, science can explain why an individual died, but religion can also explain where the individual has gone after death.

Karl Marx : The Conflict View of Religion

Another sociologist who proposed a conflict theory of religion was [Karl Marx](#), who argued that religion is a form of **ideology** that serves the interests of the dominant class. Ideology refers to a set of ideas and beliefs that justify and legitimize the existing social order and inequalities.

Marx claimed that religion emerged from the material conditions of human existence, and that it reflects the economic and political relations of the society. He also claimed that religion performs various dysfunctions for the society, such as creating false consciousness, promoting exploitation, and hindering revolution.

Marx rejected the theories of Tylor, Spencer, Muller, and Durkheim, and criticized them for being idealist and conservative. He argued that sociology is a science that does not believe in gods or spirits, and that religion cannot be explained by psychology or sociology.

He argued that religion is a product of human history and struggle, and that it conceals the real contradictions and conflicts of the society. He argued that the dominant class, or the bourgeoisie, uses religion as a tool to oppress and manipulate the subordinate class, or the proletariat, and that by worshipping it, people are actually worshipping their oppressors.

He argued that *religion is the opium of the masses*, and that it must be abolished for the sake of social justice and liberation.

Max Weber : Religion as a tool of Social Change

Another sociologist who proposed a [social action theory](#) of religion was [Max Weber](#), who argued that religion can be a source of **social change** and **rationalization**.

Social change refers to the transformation of the social structure and culture, and rationalization refers to the process of making human actions and institutions

more efficient and calculable. Weber claimed that religion can influence the social change and rationalization, by providing new values, motivations, and orientations for human action.

He also claimed that religion can be influenced by the social change and rationalization, by adapting to the new social conditions and demands.

Weber rejected the theories of Tylor, Spencer, Muller, Durkheim, and Marx, and criticized them for being too simplistic and deterministic. He argued that sociology is a science that does not believe in absolute truths or laws, and that religion cannot be reduced to one factor or function.

He argued that religion is a complex and dynamic phenomenon, and that it interacts with other social factors and phenomena. He argued that religion can have both positive and negative effects on the society, depending on the historical and cultural context. He argued that religion can be a force of social innovation and development, as well as a force of social conservation and stagnation.

In his book, [The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism](#), Weber gave an example of how religion can influence the social change and rationalization.

Weber claimed that the Protestant ethic, which is a set of values and beliefs that emphasize hard work, thrift, and discipline, was a major factor in the rise of capitalism, which is a system of economic and social organization that is based on private ownership, free market, and profit motive.

He argued that the Protestant ethic was influenced by the *Calvinist doctrine of predestination*, which is the belief that God has already decided the fate of every individual, and that only a few are chosen for salvation. He argued that this doctrine created a sense of anxiety and uncertainty among the believers, who sought to find signs of their salvation in their worldly success and achievements.

He argued that this led them to pursue their economic activities with a rational and calculative spirit, which he called the spirit of capitalism. He argued that the spirit of capitalism transformed the traditional and feudal modes of production into modern and rational ones, and gave rise to a new social order and culture.

However, Weber also acknowledged that religion can have negative effects on the social change and rationalization, such as causing social conflicts, inhibiting social progress, and alienating individuals.

He argued that religion can become irrational and dysfunctional when it loses its relevance and legitimacy, and when it fails to adapt to the changing social conditions and demands. He argued that religion can also become a source of

social resistance and stagnation, when it opposes the rationalization and secularization of the society, and when it preserves the traditional and irrational values and practices.

Frazer: Magic and Religion

Frazer was a Scottish anthropologist and folklorist who wrote a famous book called **The Golden Bough**, in which he compared the myths and rituals of various cultures and religions¹. He proposed a theory of the origin and evolution of religion, based on the idea that human thought progresses from magic to religion to science.

James Frazer, in his critique of religion, contended that both magic and religion were products of uncivilized thought and had no place in a civilized society. He described magic as the illegitimate sibling of science, claiming to fulfill the same functions but lacking legitimacy. According to Frazer, magic would eventually be supplanted by religion, which, in turn, would yield to science.

Magic: The Primitive Attempt to Control Nature

In Frazer's view, magic represents humanity's initial and most rudimentary endeavor to fathom and manipulate the natural world. This mode of thinking hinges on the belief in a causal link between entities that share visual resemblances or possess associations. Be it the connection between words and actions, symbols and objects, or parts and wholes, these linkages form the bedrock of magical beliefs. For instance, the utterance of an incantation or the enactment of a specific gesture is thought to exert influence over the unfolding of events. Alternatively, harming an image or a part of a person is believed to inflict harm upon the individual as a whole. Frazer categorized these two manifestations of magic as sympathetic and contagious magic, respectively.

Frazer's assessment of magic is trenchant and unapologetic. He perceives it as a misguided and irrational form of thought, for it defies the laws of nature and logic. Additionally, he asserts that magic is a futile and perilous mode of action, often yielding ineffective results or leading to detrimental consequences for the practitioner. He firmly posits that magic is a product of uncivilized societies and contends that it has no place in an advanced, civilized world. He likens magic to a spurious sibling of science, as it purports to fulfill identical functions but lacks authenticity.

Religion: The Intermediate Path to Understanding Nature

Moving onward, Frazer identifies religion as the intermediary stage in humanity's quest to fathom and control the natural world. Religion revolves around the belief

in the existence of potent and enigmatic forces or beings governing the natural realm. Humans, according to this perspective, can communicate with and influence these divine entities through prayers and offerings. By seeking blessings or providing gifts, individuals believe they can sway the intentions of gods or spirits. Frazer labels this form of religion as “positive,” as it postulates that humans possess the ability to impact these potent supernatural forces.

Frazer’s perspective on religion is notably more positive. He views it as a superior and more rational mode of thinking compared to magic, as it acknowledges the constraints and uncertainties inherent in human knowledge and action. Moreover, religion is perceived as a more efficacious and secure form of action than magic, often resulting in desired outcomes or averting undesirable consequences. According to Frazer, religion stands as the product of a cultivated mind and supersedes magic as the predominant framework for humanity’s pursuit of understanding and controlling the natural world. It serves as a transitional phase, preparing the groundwork for the eventual shift to a scientific mode of thought.

Science: The Ultimate Quest to Understand Nature

Finally, Frazer introduces science as the third and ultimate stage in humanity’s endeavor to comprehend and manipulate the natural world. Science rests on the premise that a comprehensive natural order and a set of rules govern natural phenomena, and humans can discern and utilize these through systematic observation and experimentation. This scientific approach involves measurement, testing, and meticulous investigation, enabling individuals to ascertain the cause-and-effect relationships in various events. Frazer designates this branch of science as “negative,” as it acknowledges that humans cannot alter the fundamental natural order and its rules.

From Frazer’s vantage point, science emerges as the true and rational mode of thinking, as it meticulously adheres to the laws of nature and logic. Furthermore, science is lauded as the most effective and beneficial mode of action, consistently yielding successful outcomes and preventing unwanted consequences. In Frazer’s estimation, science epitomizes the pinnacle of human civilization and surpasses religion as the prevailing paradigm for humanity’s exploration and mastery of the natural world. It represents the ultimate pinnacle of human intellectual and practical achievement, as it provides solutions to the enigmas and challenges posed by nature.

Conclusion

Religion's intricate relationship with society has captured the attention of countless sociologists, each offering distinct insights into its origins, functions, and impact on human behavior. The multifaceted nature of religion ensures that it remains a captivating subject for sociological exploration, providing valuable perspectives on human societies across the ages.

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✦ Sociological Perspectives on Religion Short Revision Notes

Topic	Key Points
Importance of Religion in Society	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Influences social interaction and worldview - Reflects values, norms, and beliefs - Shapes culture, identity, and social behavior - Central to sociological study
Sociological Approaches to Religion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Origin & evolution of religion - Functional and dysfunctional roles - Religion as cause and effect of social change - Religion's interaction with other institutions
Focus of This Study	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Major sociological theories on religion - Thinkers: Tylor, Spencer, Max Muller, Durkheim, Malinowski, Parsons, Marx, Weber, Frazer

◆ Theories of Origin & Evolution of Religion

Sociologist(s)	Theory	Main Idea	Key Points
Edward Tylor & Herbert Spencer	Animism	Earliest form of religion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Belief in spirits/souls in nature - Origin from dreams, shadows, death - Evolved into polytheism → monotheism
Max Muller	Naturism	Worship of nature forces	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Awe & fear of sun, moon, rivers, etc. - Nature personified as divine - Language development → advanced religion

◆ Theories of Functions & Dysfunctions of Religion

Sociologist	Theory Approach /	Key Assumptions	Functions of Religion	Dysfunctions
Emile Durkheim	Totemism, Functionalism	Religion = social fact	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Social solidarity - Shared beliefs & norms - Collective consciousness - Social meaning 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - May cause conflicts - May resist change - Alienation if irrelevant
Bronislaw Malinowski	Psychological functions	Religion reduces anxiety	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Emotional support in crises like birth/death - Relieves fear of uncertainty 	Not much focus on dysfunctions
Talcott Parsons	Value integration theory	Religion explains mysteries	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Answers beyond science - Socialization of values - Moral order & stability 	May justify outdated norms

◆ Theories of Conflict & Social Change

Sociologist	Perspective	View on Religion	Functions	Dysfunctions
Karl Marx	Conflict Theory	Religion → ideology of ruling class	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Temporary consolation to oppressed 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Creates false consciousness - Supports exploitation - Prevents revolution - "Opium of the masses"
Max Weber	Social Action Theory	Religion can change society	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Religion → motivation for change 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Can oppose rationalization

			- Protestant ethic → Capitalism	- May preserve inequality
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♦ Evolutionary Theory: Magic → Religion → Science

Thinker	Stage	Definition	Example	Relation with Society
James Frazer	Magic	Primitive belief that symbols/actions control nature	Sympathetic & contagious magic	Irrational; belongs to uncivilized societies
	Religion	Belief in and worship of supernatural beings	Prayers & rituals	Transitional stage; still irrational but safer than magic
	Science	Rational, systematic study of nature	Experiments & observation	Most advanced stage; replaces religion