Sociological Perspectives on Religion

By

John Carpenter

Sociology B1

CRN 12345

John Carpenter

January 1, 2012
Emile Durkheim (1995: Original 1912) defined religion as a *unified system of beliefs, rituals, and practices that define and express the nature of sacred things in relationship to the profane things of the world* and, from a sociological perspective, the importance of religion as a social institution cannot be overstated. Consider the fact that literally all major world religions promote a standard of behavior in keeping with the tenets of their particular system of belief. And, with few exceptions, this behavior is motivated by an individual desire for a positive experience in this life and hopeful expectations of an eternal life to come. This individual standard of behavior is shared by a community of believers and practised as a group within the context of the larger society. As a result, religion can have a considerable degree of influence over every other social institution and the nature of the various beliefs, rituals, and practices acquire a cultural significance.

**Functionalism**

In support of the functionalist perspective, and in keeping with a macro approach to sociology, Durkheim (1995: Original 1912) placed a far greater emphasis on the collective life or community than he did on the individual. The nature of individual behavior was always considered in relationship to the degree of influence held by the larger community. This is an important point if we are to understand Durkheim’s perspective of religion. For Durkheim, the unified system of beliefs, rituals, and practices associated with religion provided a community with *collective representations* that helped to create a sense of social order and establish the foundation for all other social relationships. These collective representations are the ideas, beliefs, and values shared by a religious community that generate a likeminded attitude on the part of
individual believers. With this in mind, Durkheim identified three important functions that religion served within a society.

**Social cohesion:** The practice of religion is a communal event. By participating in a unified system of beliefs, rituals, and practices, each individual member affirms and reaffirms their relationship to the larger community of faith. This shared experience creates a profound sense of unity that inspires cohesion around commonly held ideas.

**Social control:** As we mentioned earlier, literally all major world religions promote a standard of behavior in keeping with the tenets of their particular system of belief. When a religious community encourages conformity to a given standard, they are helping to establish a system of normative behavior that serves to regulate social interaction in general. Such normative behaviors provide the degree of regulation necessary to the survival of any society.

**Providing meaning and purpose:** Religion seeks to answer important questions such as why we exist, why people suffer and die, and what happens when we die. For many people, the most significant events in life are connected with religious ceremony; such things as birth, marriage, and death. For many cultures, the most important annual celebrations have religious foundations.

From a structural functional perspective religion provides a cohesive element to the overall social structure. It helps to keep society functioning well together. James Coleman (1990) points out that the religious community is interested in the individual becoming a moral being while the secular community is interested in the individual becoming self-sufficient, sociable, and a contributing member to society. Ultimately both
these communities are interested in the individual adhering to social norms that serve to benefit others. Thus, both communities are seeking the same thing.

### Conflict

Of all his writings, **Karl Marx** (1964: Original 1848) is perhaps best remembered for the phrase: "[Religion] is the Opiate of the Masses." The statement provides a clear indication of the Marxist, and hence conflict, perspective of religion. According to Marx, religion served the interests of the elite bourgeoisie by pacifying the oppressed proletariat. Religion was perceived as encouraging the underprivileged to accept their social condition in this life by providing the hope of a better life to come. As an atheist, Marx described religion as “the sigh of the oppressed creature, the sentiment of a heartless world, and the soul of a soulless condition” (1964: Original 1848: 35).

**Max Weber** (1996: Original 1930) took the conflict perspective of religion in a somewhat different direction. In general, Weber believed that the adherence to certain religious ideals on the part of believers could create significant social change. In particular, he focused on the protestant ethic characteristic of the reformation period of Christianity. This faith based ethic called for lifestyle committed to a discipline of hard work and frugal living as an indication of one’s devotion to God. Weber argued that this protestant ethic was particularly characteristic of the religious values associated with the reformation theology of John Calvin (1509-1564) and influenced by the Calvinistic theological tenet of predestination. According to this perspective, the eternal fate of every human being is predetermined by God prior to birth. This means that some individuals are elected for eternal glory (the elect) while others are predestined for everlasting condemnation and it is essentially impossible for a person to know their
individual fate before that time arrives. According to Weber, the uncertainty associated with the doctrine of predestination combined with the protestant ethic to create socioeconomic conditions necessary for the development of modern capitalism. The commitment to hard work and a frugal lifestyle allowed for the accumulation of wealth. This prosperity was understood as a blessing from God and a sign for the elect. The re-investment and further accumulation of wealth provided an even greater assurance of one’s salvation. This perspective is in contrast to the poor whose condition was understood to be a sign of one’s condemnation.

While Marx and Weber offer very different views of religion from a conflict perspective, each suggest that religion has been used to support and/or justify the social inequality. A more contemporary perspective of this condition began as a social movement in Latin America during the 1960s. Using a combination of Marxism and Catholicism, Liberation Theology sought to endorse religion while challenging social inequality. Juan Luis Segundo (1975) argues that social oppression is contrary to the true message of liberation found in the Christian scriptures. Further, the reality of this message has historically been misrepresented by the selfish interests of the ruling classes. The fact that liberation theology is often Marxist is character has prompted the Catholic Church to reject it as a distortion of church doctrine.

**Symbolic Interaction**

With the symbolic interaction perspective we move away from the big picture of religion as a social institution and focus on the way in which various definitions and meanings have an impact on social interaction at the individual and small group levels. If you recall, religion is defined as *a unified system of beliefs, rituals, and practices that*
define and express the nature of sacred things in relationship to the profane things of the world (Durkheim 1995: Original 1912). The fact that this definition, and religion in general, is concerned with something “beyond” the reality of this life (O’Dea: 1966) means that the concepts of sacred and profane are not matters of fact but rather a matter of faith. As such, the symbolic interactionist perspective sees these things as socially constructed realities. In other words, religious beliefs, rituals, and practices in relationship to the sacred and profane have meaning because a community of believers agree that they do. This perspective does not necessarily deny the divine reality of religious beliefs and values; it simply emphasizes the role of a social consensus.

Religious beliefs, rituals, and practices can have a significant impact on the self concept when an individual defines oneself in terms of religious affiliation. Further, those same beliefs and values can provide individuals with a sense of security and comfort in difficult times.

Like many sociologists, Peter L. Berger (1964) initially embraced the idea of secularization which argues that the importance of religious beliefs and practices would decline as a society modernizes. He would later, however, come to recognize the tenacious and resilient nature of religion and concede that rather than decline, religion would more likely to grow in significance. Whether one accepts the conflict, functionalist, or interactionist perspective, or any combination there of, it is difficult to deny the exceptional ability of a religious organization to adapt and thrive in the quagmire of a complex and ever changing society. While the message may be ancient the importance of religion as a contemporary and insightful social institution cannot be overstated.
References


