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SOC 301: SOCIOLOGY OF RELIGION

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SOCIOLOGY OF RELIGION

Sociology of religion is a sociological investigation into religion. It is an investigation geared towards the exposition of the social aspects or components of religion. This investigation is carried out with an understanding that religion is not only purely spiritual, devoid of social characteristics, but also has its foundation on social behaviour of people.

Sociology of religion can also be defined as the relationship of religion to social structures and social processes. According to New Catholic Encyclopedia, it is the relationship of religion to the social stabilities, social changes and the functional problems of the society. It is the study of the internal structures, development, problems and dilemmas of social organization in relation to other social institutions.

Man, in his sojourn on earth, often suffers from political, cultural, socio-economic, spiritual and even psychological problems. Sometimes, his spiritual problems accumulate to such a degree that they culminate or result in psychological problems, and vice versa. Besides, the link between his social life and religious life is such that they seem inseparable, and indeed, separating them would amount to dissociating man’s essential nature as both a religious and social being. No doubt, this study is aimed at examining those expressions of man as both religious and social being.

Sociology of religion must have to consider the two basic relationships in man’s life - the vertical and horizontal. The vertical relationship is man’s relationship with his supreme being (God) while his horizontal relationship is that which exists between him and his fellow humans. One should wonder little why Christ talks of the summary of the commandments of God as the “love of God” and “love of neighbour.” Here, therefore, lies the biblical confirmation of this injunction: “If anyone says, ‘I love God’ and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen”(l Jn. 4:20) and “he who loves God should love his brother also”(l Jn. 4:21).

Sociology of religion is, therefore, aimed at establishing the fact that religion is very essential for man, and since man is by nature ordered to social living, religion cannot be just the private affair of the individual. In fact, the community should also promote it since it is in this community that religious life achieves full development (cf. Mt. 18:20), hence, the term “*ecclesia*” - the worshipping community.

SOCIOLOGICAL FUNCTIONS OF RELIGION

When we talk of sociological (or social) functions of religion, we mean what religion is actually doing in the society, that is, the effects it may have in the society of men. In this context, our concern is with the function (purpose) religion, as a social occasion or event, is fulfilling in the society. We shall briefly examine those social functions of religion, what Nadel (1954:ix) prefers to call “capacities” or “competences” of religion, which mean, in the words of Goldthorpe (1985:202) “the things that religion can do, the effects it may have, the desires, needs, or purposes that it may serve.

These capacities of religion, as Nadel conceives them, are four in number, namely: first, the cosmological aspects, i.e., “the capacity of religion to furnish certain supplements to the view of the world of experience”; secondly, its capacity to announce and maintain moral values; thirdly, its competence to hold together societies and sustain their structures; fourthly, its competence to furnish individuals with specific experiences and stimulations.

1. The Cosmological Aspects

Religion serves as supplement to the conception of the nature of the universe and man’s place in it in order to “relativize”, to use Yinger’s (1957:15-16) phraseology, the risks and disasters which man faces as a result of the action of natural forces. Man, having been thrown into the world without his consent finds it difficult to understand his purpose of being in a seemingly hostile world. Among man’s deeper anxieties are those of the nature of the world and his place in it. Is the universe hostile or friendly, or indifferently neutral to us? Can there be any way of “relativizing” particular disasters like floods, drought, earthquake, locust swarms etc. for them to be viewed as part of the greater good? Man needs to be reassured about such large, vague problems as these, and religion’s capacity to provide certain supplements to the world of experience is a welcome panacea. The solutions or answer it provides to the overwhelming problems or questions respectively about the reasonableness of being in the world do not follow the scientific pattern. It does not provide an answer with an intellectual bias or emphasis.

Religion plays this role most poignantly at death, that is, at the death of a person’s close kin or even friends. Considering the fact that the deceased is no longer to come back to this earth, there is a sense of despondence expressed in the behaviour of people. True enough, death of a person whom one loves dearly is a big lost. The gap created as a result of such sad phenomenon is irreplaceable. It becomes increasingly necessary for there to be reassurance so that such lost will be tolerable and be borne with equanimity. This explains why St. Paul in his first letter to the Thessalonians (4:13-18) admonished them not to keep on brooding their dead relatives as others who have no hope, even to the extent of leaving their civic responsibilities.

It is not surprising, therefore, that as a result of this need or desire for reassurance, almost all religions are very much concerned with death and have equally elaborate rituals for the disposal of the dead. Such measure creates a sense of satisfaction since it has social psychological as well as religious significance. There is also a set of beliefs about the continuation of the degree of one’s sense of despondence especially in the face of “the shock of absolute bereavement and the prospect of absolute extinction”(Goldthorpe, 1985:203). Religion offers answer to the problem of the ultimate end of man by assuring man that God, our providential Father, is the end of man, which as St. Augustine would say, our souls are restless until they rest in God.

1. Moral Values

The connection of religion and morals is undeniable though it may not be a simple one. Christianity and Islam, for instance, link faith with morality very strongly. The Ten Commandments (the Decalogue), which are the basis of morality, can be elaborated into secular law. Since the Decalogue is divinely handed to us, one’s punishment or rewards for bad or good life respectively in the life after death depend on it. Notably, Buddhism is a very strongly ethical religion. Its adherers are promised inner peace and a withdrawal from the stresses of the world if they maintain right conduct. There are no beliefs in god or spirits, nor any kind of rituals or sacrifices prescribed.

In Hinduism, there is intricate relationship between belief and morals. The gods include the destroyer as well as the creator. There are beliefs about rewards and punishments in the form of rebirth (transmigration) into a higher or lower caste. Morality, which is prescribed, depends on which caste one belongs. Thus, one devotee may find it convenient to fast three days a week; another may find it a pious duty to walk barefoot to the source of the Ganges River.

However, in traditional African religions, although the connection between religion and morality is not pronounced, it is believed that one’s conduct will be rewarded or punished depending on the nature of conduct. Thus, contrary to Nadel’s prescription that Nupe religion was amoral, it is not uncommon for African traditionalist to observe the norms of the land in the fear that he will be punished if he behaves otherwise.

In the main, religion is the servant of morality and performs its moral function in the society. Without religion, the practice of morality will end in a farce.

1. Social Structure

Nadel opines that it is the competence of religion “to hold together societies and sustain their structure.” Emile Durkheim (18858-1917) in his fourth and profoundly important work, Elementary Forms of the Religious Life, which touches on this aspect of sociology of religion, described society as something “existing exclusively within the minds of individuals.”

Durkheim was so much preoccupied with the problem of social integration and tried to discover what holds societies together with a view to establishing the fundamental principles of social solidarity. For him, it is the social function of religion “to engender and sustain social solidarity” (Goldthorpe, 1985:205). This inevitable conclusion was reached because, in the words of Wilkins (1976:12-13), “The structure of any society rests on patterns of behaviour developing from commonly held beliefs and values becoming institutionalised in the social system and being reflected in the personalities of the individual members of the society.” Durkheim refers to the sense of unity derived from this social integration as the conscience collective, and by this concept, he meant that social solidarity depends largely on the degree to which individuals in a society feel the sense of commitment to that society and their readiness to conform to institutionalised patterns of behaviour.

Some theorists have argued that the goals of an individual may sometimes conflict with the norms that are located in the society as a whole. In Durkheim’s view, this assumption is unfounded since personal goals can only be meaningful when they are in conformity to the# norms and values of society. That was what gave rise to his concept of anomie, which he discussed in his famous Du Suicide, published in 1897. According to him, any event which upsets the established norms and values of a society brings about the breakdown of the conscience collective in which case thee individual finds himself in a state of ‘normlessness’, or anomie. Thus, he contends that anomie results both in times of economic buoyancy (prosperity) as well as in times of depression.

At this juncture, we need to recall that Durkheim has a conservative view of religion in which case religion is conceived as “holding and sustaining the existing social structure.” This view is unquestionable, but it should be added that religion brings about social change. Thus, the introduction of new religious ideas from outside a society gives rise to change in people’s attitude to life in general. It also brings about changes in literary, modern education and modem medical methods, which equally revolutionize our tradition system.

1. Competence to Furnish Individuals with Specific Attitudes and Stimulations.

This competence of religion to furnish individual with specific attitudes and stimulations entails the examination of the already listed competences of religion, but from a different angle - that of individual psychology. Nadel was influenced by the study of the psychologist, Michael Argyle based on British and American Studies. It was discovered that in many of these studies, those who undergo a definite religious experience of conversion do so mostly in adolescence.

This stage of adolescence in western countries is marked by growth in religious doubts and attendance which is ordinarily encouraged by the institutionalised religious teaching which children receive in social tends to fall off. It is observed that there would be steady decline in religious activity -for instance, church attendance or the saying of private prayers - which last till young adulthood. This lost of interest in religious activities is awaken after the age of 30. American studies in particular show that certainty of an after-life increases sharply in old age. More women than men go to church, say private prayers and avo& belief in God with about twenty-five per cent more. The same thing could be said of Nigeria where more women are found in large number in church and are also seen attending one church ceremony or another as well as keeping vigils. We may adduce the reason for this attitude to their particular anxieties about getting a (good) husband, childlessness, childbirth and the rearing of children as well as the roles conventionally assigned to them on the ‘expressive’ side of family life. It is in the light of this evidence that it becomes reasonable to talk of a need for ritual in cruses of life, ritual which is derived from and intelligible in the light of belief or faith. This need for ritual is common to all but it is more strongly expressed by those who are likely to be satisfied by a rational or naturalistic view of the hazards of life.

1. Group Integration

Religion, as a social event, provides a basis for people to unite together and thereby form integrated groups. In [[1]](#footnote-1)doing this, homogeneity is assured as they share the same value system - materially and spiritually. For instance, if a society has religion to which its members are adherers, the religion will play a vital role in holding the individuals to each other. This is because, in the words of Miller (1979:23), “religion is not essentially an individualistic enterprise. It is fellowship, a covenant among people who possess a common stock of emotion and feeling, attitude and trust, towards the mysteries of human existence and of God.” This will even eventually be a source of progress for the society in the face of crises or a disaster, but if there is no serious cohesive force among them, the society will be disorganised and lose the sense of purpose. Hence, the saying, “united we stand, divided we fall.”

In a moment of crises, when there seem to be no hope of survival, it unites people when they gather to pray for survival. Such prayer may energise the people’s resolve to trust in God’s providence. For example, the prayer for Nigeria in distress said in the Catholic Church since 1996 is evidence of such prayers for survival.

Again, when there is drought, people who have the same religious belief usually gather to pray to their gods so that it will bring rain in the land. For example, in 1993, in Bomu State of Nigeria, the Moslems engaged themselves in prayers and fasting and thereafter rain came. Apart from the moments of crises - crises situations - people who share the same religious belief do celebrate one feast or another. For instance, Christians do celebrate the birth of Christ on December 25 and his resurrection at Easter.

It is pertinent to observe that religious beliefs serve as strong divisive factors, especially in very large, complex societies like our own. Believers are set apart from non­believers, and even among Christians, there is separation of people belonging to different denominations. Sometimes, as a result of these social patterns, there may be conflict between rival religious groups. In Britain, it was recorded that the antagonism between Catholics and Protestants (i.e., our separated brethren) led to civil war as well as a long dynastic struggle for supremacy.

Lastly, some issues like abortion, divorce, birth control, nuclear warfare etc., border on morality and the Christian denominations are still divided as to their exact mode of perception.

1. **The Control of Stress**

The importance of religion in controlling stress cannot be over-emphasised if we remember the very words of Karl Marx, “religion is the sign of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, just as it is the spirit of the spiritless situation. It is the opium of the people.”

Religion helps to control stress and tension. It is a palliative, a soporific that prevents the oppressed and the downtrodden from making any effort to better their lot by resisting their exploiters. Usually, it is the poor and the oppressed members of the society who are most likely to suffer from frustration and tension. It is via their emotional expressions in organised religious practices that they can be relieved of their tension instead of resorting to violence and acts of wanton destruction.

The less privileged in the society, especially those in state of poverty and ignorance will most readily respond to those who preach to them the beatitude that awaits the in the life to come. For instance, they can easily accept Christianity in its preaching of a double life and offering thee imaginary joys of heaven as a solace for the real miseries of life. With faith, they will tolerate their condition with the understanding that God knows all their problems. In addition, those who suffer from loneliness and boredom as a result of their old age, disease, etc. can conveniently find solace in the organised religious practices. It is interesting to note that the control of stress and tension as a social function of religion will begin to wane if the society can provide or overcome successfully those factors that bring about frustration and misery. But this is not to say that there will ever be a time when religion will cease to perform this function. This is because even if there is improvement in the living standards, destruction of ignorance, provision of economic and medical needs of the people, there will be the need of religion in those neglected areas of human life.

1. **Resolving Conflict**

Religion is one of the veritable means of containing and resolving conflict. Conflicts may take many dimensions. The term “conflict” is used by sociologists in its wide sense, ranging from debate, bargaining, competition, controlled institutionalised fighting (e.g. dueling) to outright violence.

Again, various religious leaders often encourage their adherers to bring their differences to the church instead of taking it to court. Indeed, most of the conflicts especially those pertaining to quarrelling between husband and wife, divorce, land dispute etc., have been settled in the church most effectively which perhaps would not have been settled in court.

1. **The Maintenance of Behaviour Patterns**

Religion also plays an important part in maintaining order in the society, for it provides religious morality and supernatural sanctions, which ensure that individuals confirm to those patterns. In addition, rules and regulation are derived either from the revelation made by the supreme being (God) to man through the agency of prophets and others divinely inspired. These rules and regulations are observed in order not to incur the wrath of the divinity; hence, the society is well ordered.

In the Christian religion, (especially Catholics who use the Canon law) and Islamic religion (where the Moslims use the Sharia law), their laws are meant to maintain an atmosphere of serenity and peace thereby discouraging evil in the society and encouraging good deeds. For instance, “The government of Zamfara State ordered the amputation of notorious cow thief, Mr Baba Bello Tangede of Talata Mafara area of the state convicted under Islamic Sharia law.”(See: Tell Magazine, No. 16, April 17, 2000).

**9. Social Communication**

Religion helps people to communicate with one another. Whenever there is an organised religious ceremony, people meet together to pray and perform some ritual. They also meet together indirectly through having common myths, legends, morals and views of the world. Religion enables them to understand one another and to communicate their ideas and feelings and this invariably leads to their being viewed as a social unit though they are from different families.

Besides, religion makes it possible for our shared-social life to be strengthened. This is so because it is in the gathering of the worshippers in their various religious houses that they are informed about the goings-on in the society, and the need to carry along the message of the gospel. It may not be an exaggeration to add that it is during the religious activities that people are informed about so many things they need to know - ranging from announcement about wedding, birthdays, festivity, funeral ceremony, naming ceremony, anniversary, to ordinary meetings of clubs, organisations etc.

ELEMENTS OF RELIGION

Throughout the duration of mankind’s history, man has never stopped wondering about the mysteries of existence. The problem of death for instance, despite the advancement in medical technology, has continued to hunt man reducing his state of joy and happiness. The helplessness of man in the midst of natural disasters and catastrophe, the insecurity man feels despite modern preservation and protection techniques in military technology as well as man’s ability to explain most of the forces of nature have all contributed to put man in a wondering situation. Trying to use his\* intelligence and reason to find answers to these problems, man is yet confronted with a lot of limitations. Sooner or later, man had to posit or rather discover the existence of a reality, who, as it were, can give answers to the mysteries of existence, able to provide man with the security that man cannot give to himself, and also able to sustain the cosmic order. This is the starting point of the religious man, man in his vertical dimension, in which man looks up to a being outside of himself, and who holds the universe under his palms.

There are certain things that characterise most, if not all the religions; some elements that are found in each religion or majority of religions. They are at least three basic elements: Beliefs, cults and morals or laws.

Belief

A characteristic of religion is that in one way or another it always includes the concept of the supernatural, the “extraordinary, the “infinite”, the “power manifesting itself in the universe.” The labelling of something as supernatural suggests, according to Mischa Titiev, that it can never be made manifest to human taste, touch, smell, sight, or hearing, even with the aid of devices like powerful telescopes or sound amplifiers. In other words, religion deals with the scientifically unknowable. “To believe wholeheartedly in the existence of anything that cannot and may never be grasped by one’s senses forms the very core of religion.”

Belief in a supernatural being, whose existence and lordship gives man such confidence and security to the extent that man’s fear of the unknown is allayed, forms the first part of man’s religious experience. Belief means the acceptance of any given preposition as true. Such acceptance is essentially intellectual, although it maybe strongly coloured by emotion. In any case, it establishes a mental condition in the individual, which may act as the basis for voluntary action. The reality of belief is not dependent upon the intrinsic, objective truth of the particular proposition. There are false beliefs and true belief. This is because a particular belief may be based on sound factual evidence or upon prejudiced intuition or misleading appearance. There can, accordingly, be scientific belief, superstitions belief and whimsical belief. John L. Gillin remarks that the nature of its derivation does not affect the potency of belief itself. People will act just as energetically, determinedly, fanatically upon the basis of false beliefs as of true beliefs.

Beliefs fashion the behaviour of individuals. Man’s value systems and attitudes are functions of his beliefs. That is why different religious peculiar ways of fashioning the life-style of their members. And since beliefs affect the core of the personality, one’s beliefs create a wall of exclusiveness to others not sharing his beliefs. By this exclusiveness, he becomes full of himself such that at timers he looks at a non-member as an enemy who should even be eliminated if possible. This phenomenon underscores the religion conflicts and intolerance among people.

Closely allied to the belief in the supernatural is the belief in the sacred. In fact, in many cases the supernatural is believed to be sacred. In some instances, however, supernatural beings or powers are not defined as sacred. For example, religious beliefs may include definitions of evil spirits or devils, not considered sacred, although they are “not of this world”. In yet other cases, supernatural power is thought of as being neutral - neither sacred nor evil.

The concept of the sacred or the holy, however, is very broad and extends beyond the concept of supernatural beings. Its application is, indeed, almost unlimited. In addition to the supernatural it may be applied to human beings, to animals, to inanimate objects, or to abstract ideas and beliefs, to human behaviour patterns, to words, or to anything. The sacred, whatever it may be, is always distinguished from the non sacred or the secular, the profane, the worldly and the common. The sacred as distinct from the profane, represents an order of reality, the presence of which commands man’s attention and at the same time escapes him. It is simultaneously desired and regarded with awe. This is to say that it possesses an essentially ambivalent character, which makes man feel once irresistibly attracted by its grandeur and frightened by its superiority.

**Cult**

Beliefs are not content in remaining passive in the minds of the believer. They try to be made manifest. It has been observed th**at one’s values and attitudinal** orientation are functions of one’s beliefs. Thus, in a way, because of man’s belief in the transcendental reality, man tries in one way or the other to enter into relationship with this invisible reality. His dependence upon the invisible reality makes man to develop that subservient spirit towards the invisible. Thus, man tries to please him in a that man pleases his master and since man relies on him for protection and existence, man tries to offer him respect, veneration and loyalty. This is the origin of cult which man makes tto the transcendental reality. It is a development by human intelligence through experience that a good turn deserves another. Thus, cult is a way of reciprocating the good gestures of the Supreme Being by man. Herein lies the origin of rituals, worship, sacrifices and prayers in honour of God.

Cult has been defined as a body of religious rites and practices associated with the worship or propitiation of a particular divinity or group of supernatural beings. Cults derive from man’s dependency on the Supreme Being, a dependency that necessitates worship or propitiation. In the course of the religious rituals, the worshipper is so confident that his actions must invariably produce the desired result. This confidence is borne in mind when worshipper performs some sacrifices, when he says some prayers etc. The issue here is that he is performing a religious ritual, a ritual based on the conviction that the Supreme Being is his sovereign Lord although he is not visible to him. This is a virtue of religion that is only grasped by faith. Ritual, prayers and sacrifice are some of the principal components of cult.

**Ritual**

It is not sufficient for us humans merely to think our way through the restrictions that life and death impose upon us. We are bodily beings, feeling beings, acting beings, and not simply thinking ones. Rational arguments alone have never been able to cut a path through the limits on life. Merely thinking our way through difficulties seldom works. And so a ritualistic drama or acting out of a sense of “breaking through” is an intrinsic part of most religious cult, from the Stone Age to the present. Moreover, even where a sense of the sacred is no longer prominent, as in secularised societies, the ritualistic impulse is still present. Some kind of ritualistic activity is essential to human social existence. Rituals are ways in which people communally celebrate the meaning that give them their identities. And in this way rituals function to provide social solidarity.

The most important rituals are rites of passage, and they have to do with transitions from one stage of life to another. By participating in such rites one’s identity undergoesan adventurous transformation, usually involving a widening and deepening of relationship to the community and God.

Take, for instance, the rite of initiation. At a certain time in the life of a member of a society, often during early adolescence, it is time to break away from childhood and enter decisively into the adult world or into full membership in the life of the society. In order to dramatise this moment of transition a formalised “rite of passage” is usually prescribed. This initiation rite often involves undergoing a kind of “death”, such as being sent the desert alone, being inserted into a hollow place (such as a grave, log, tent or cave) symbolising burial. At the end of the rite, which may last many days in some cases, and often involves severe pain and discomfort, the initiate is “reborn” into a new life and a new identity. The survival of initiation rites into our own day indicates their enormous psychological and spiritual importance for our species. But in general they do not have the same significance for us today that they had in the past, perhaps to our detriment. The Christian sacraments of baptism and confirmation are referred to as “rites of initiation.” Some psychologists have sometimes lamented the absence of powerful rites of passage in the lives of people today, for they recognise the power such rites have traditionally had in bringing about a sense of purpose and commitment that people need in order to live full and happy lives.

**Prayer and Sacrifice**

Prayer is both petition and expression of gratitude to the sacred power or powers that are believed to govern nature and human life. Sacrifice, a word derived from the Latin “to make holy” is also at the heart both petitionary and thankful. In sacrificial offerings of fruit or animals, and even of humans, the objective is not merely to appease spirits in order to ensure continuing benefits. Sacrifice is also a gesture indicating a people’s grateful envisagement of the gifts of food and life as belonging to a wider world than just that of self-interest. By sacrificing significant items in their lives, people situate their world within a divine framework. They offer sacrifice order to part of a deeper and more meaningful order. Thus sacrificial rites are another way in which religious people break out of the circle of the purely human or purely natural to commune with the divine. Elements of this sacrificial impulse are witnessed today in the Christian sacrifice of the mass.

If we were to look with the interests of a social scientist at the evolution of mammalian life on our planet, and then if we tried to point to an activity that clearly distinguishes human from other mammals, we might be tempted to say that it is human propensity to offer prayer and sacrifice. Most of our human characteristics have close parallels in the behavioural patterns of other species, but there is nothing in the latter that comes close to praying and sacrificing. Animals have mates, raise families, hunt and gather, communicate with one another, have a certain degree of sensitivity and ability to adapt to the world in creative ways. They **even have “rituals” like the d**ancing of bees and the courting of birds. But only humans, as far as we know, pray and sacrifice. And since prayer and sacrifice are so much a part of religion, it could be argued that religiousness is most distinctively human characteristic.

**Moral (Law)**

Religious beliefs and practices relate man to the supernatural in ways, which he believes, will evoke certain responses from the superior powers of the unknown. In doing this, he also frequently relates himself in specific ways to the known world - to other human beings and also to the inanimate world. He is thus led to accept certain behaviour patterns as being more in harmony with the supernatural approval while others are disapproved. Religion then includes a series of definitions as to what man should do when he interacts with others - “thou shall” - and conversely, definitions as to what he should avoid - series of “Thou shall not.” These moral strictures define the goodness and badness of things or practices.

Therefore, moral is one of the three major elements of religion. No religion is without morals. Since man believes that God is the overseer of his entire existence, he wants to be in good relationship with him always so that God would not withdraw his providential care upon him. Man tries to formulate some guides or regulations that will act as checks and balances for harmonious interactions between him and the Supreme Being. Also certain regulations are prescribed between man and God. For if there is a breach between man and man such a breach can affect that between man and God. This is then the origin of moral and civil laws.

Our discussion here emphases that one of the major characteristics of religion is to provide the definitions as to what is moral and what is immoral - what is good and what is bad. The group of believers who share common religious beliefs and practices, then, also share common values; they accept common definitions as what is good and what is bad. While providing value definitions is one of the characteristics of religion, it should be made clear that religion is not the only source of values.

The morality of an act derives from religion, if the ground is religious, i.e., if its obligation is imposed by religion. If an action evokes a religion sanction, it is an indication but not proof that its ground is religious.

With religion understood as providing value judgments, it follows that religion will be involved in a given society’s definitions of “progress.” Religion typically enters into decisions as to where society “should be going” or what type of society should be evolving. Definitions of progress are a particular type of value judgment.

By way of summary, then, our definition of religion can be stated as follows: Religion is that part of culture composed of shared beliefs and practices which not only identify or define the supernatural and thee sacred and man’s relationships thereto, but which also relate them to thee known world in such a way that the group is provided with moral definitions as to what good (in harmony with or approved by the supernatural) and what is bad (contrary to or out of harmony with supernatural). The religious structure of every culture is based on these common denominators.

RELIGION AS A PART OF CULTURE

Religion, viewed sociologically, could be regarded as part of man’s culture and is frequently referred to as one of the major social institutions along with marriage, government, education, etc. A brief analysis of religion in terms of the characteristics of culture will indicate why it is so classified by some scholars.

1. Religion Is The Common Property Of The Group: The group into which a child is born includes religion within its way of life. The group has decided before the child is born what type of supernatural being or beings it feels should be worshipped, and how this worship should take place. It has decided what behaviour patterns it believes to have supernatural approval or disapproval. Religion is a major aspect of the culture of the group. In some societies, there are found many different religions. Each of these is considered by the sociologist to be a part of the culture of the larger group. Individual church members may come and go, but religion continues to exist independent of particular individuals.

2 Every Society Has Already Developed The Blueprint It Expects Its Members To Follow In Their Religious Behaviour: Indeed, every society exerts great effort to see that the blueprint is followed rather closely. While it is true that new religions and religious innovations to develop, it also true that most of a man’s religious behaviour was outlined and planned for him long before he was born. It was a part of the culture of his group.

3. Religious Behaviour is Acquired or Learned by Man From His Society: Such learning is both conscious and unconscious. Individuals have to bee taught specific religious behaviour patterns, such as how to participate in religious activities, how to communicate with a divine being, how to go through the prescribed rituals and ceremonies. Similarly, the individual has to learn to approve of certain activities or certain words, and to disapprove of other activities and words. He has to be taught to love or fear his supernatural being or beings.

One of the major activities of religious leaders is consciously to teach their beliefs and practices to other members of the religious group and to prospective members. Those who learn from such teachers are usually learning consciously. Religious beliefs may also be learned in an unconscious manner, through participation in religious groups or sometimes by merely associating with individuals represent a blend of both types of learning. The important point here is that, consciously or unconsciously, such beliefs are learned.

4. Religion is Transmitted Socially, not Biologically: No individual is bom with religious behaviour patterns intact. It is true that most children follow the religion of their parents, but this is a result of the social influence of the parents rather than biological transmission.

5. Religion is Constantly Changing: Religious patterns, especially after they are well established and accepted, are generally resistant to sudden or drastic change. That they do change, however, is well known. For instance, in the early church, marriage was not given enough recognition. It was looked down upon and women were regarded as second-class citizens. But today, marriage is seen not only as important sacrament but also a vocation and a way to salvation. Again, African traditional religion encouraged killing of twins etc. but today the members of the religion see the practice as an evil.

1. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)