

SOCIOLOGY OF RELIGION

Objective

The course is geared towards enabling the student to acquire fundamental knowledge on how religion and society shape up our daily living. As the dictum goes, religion is the conscious of the society and the society influences how religious practices are carried out. The student should be able to analyze and explain these influence each other and consequently human life.

Content

After the introduction to the course, the course will address the following topics: history of the sociology of religion, the sociological perspective of religion, theoretical perspectives of sociology (functionalism, critical/conflict theory, feminist theory, and symbolic interactionism), types of religious organizations, religion, and social change, and lastly social stratification.

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COURSE CAPTION

How can we live in a world without God? This question has reverberated through Western culture since the 18th Century, when social observers and theologians perceived that the

influence of religion seemed to be sharply declining. For close to two thousand years, Christianity had provided a moral and spiritual framework for Western development – supplying the impulse for numerous wars as well as comfort and guidance for believers.

We tend to forget in modern times that it had a strong material presence too. Until relatively recently, the churches rivaled, and frequently surpassed, monarchs and governments in the political power they wielded and the wealth they managed to accumulate. The priesthood maintained a monopoly over the skills of literacy, scholarship, and learning, even when education became more widespread, the churches continued to have a leading role in its organization. As industrialization took hold, as with so many other areas of social life, the place of religion changed. Church and religious bodies in Western countries lost much of the secular power they had formerly wielded. Governments took over many of the tasks previously managed by churches, including the provision of education.

INTRODUCTION

The above exposé makes the background explanation why sociologists study religion. For centuries, humankind has sought to understand and explain the “meaning of life.” Many philosophers believe this contemplation and the desire to understand our place in the universe are what differentiate humankind from other species. Religion, in one form or another, has been found in all human societies since human societies first appeared. Archaeological digs have revealed ancient ritual objects, ceremonial burial sites, and other religious artifacts. Much social conflict and even wars have resulted from religious disputes. To understand a culture, sociologists must study its religion.

The sociology of religion can be said to consist of one main theme or central question: **why have religious beliefs and practices been so central in the life of human beings and society, and why have they taken such diverse forms?** The sociology of religion poses the question of **the role and significance of religion in general, as well as that of understanding the beliefs and practices of particular groups and societies.**

What is sociology?

Sociology is the scientific study of human social life, groups, and societies. It is a dazzling and compelling enterprise as its subject matter is our own behavior as social beings. Sociology demonstrates the need to take a much broader view of why we are as we are, and why we act as we do. It teaches us that what we regard as natural, inevitable, good, or true may not be such and that “givens” of our life are strongly influenced by a number of factors: historical, cultural, spiritual, and other social forces.

Sociological tools and methods, such as surveys, polls, interviews, and analysis of historical data, can be applied to the study of religion in a culture to help us better understand the role religion plays in people’s lives and the way it influences society.

We can take for instance **tea dates**. We could point out, first of all, that tea is not just a refreshment. It possesses symbolic value as part of our day-to-day social activities. Often the ritual associated with drinking a cup of tea is much more important than the act of consuming the drink itself. For many Kenyans, the morning cup of tea stands at the center of a personal routine. It is an essential first step to starting the day. Morning tea is often followed later in the day by another cup of tea with friends in the office or elsewhere which becomes the basis of a social ritual. Two people who organize to meet for a cup of tea are more interested in getting together and chatting than in what they actually drink. Drinking and eating in all societies, in fact, provide occasions for social interaction and the enactment of rituals and these offer a rich subject matter for a sociological study.

Definition of Religion

What is religion? This has been a central issue in the sociology of religion since its inception but it has become ever more so as time has passed. In much of the modern developed world ‘religion’ can no longer be equated with the familiar mainstream church and denominational forms but takes on a plurality of guises that render the boundaries between religion and non-religion bewilderingly fuzzy. New era, flying saucer cults, radical environmentalism, eco-feminism, human potential groups, and holistic theories –

all have been identified as instances of a growing religious diversity quite different in character from the organized and exclusive religiosity of the church, denomination, and sect.

Even sport, fitness and dietary practices have been claimed by some as essentially religious in nature or at least forms of spirituality very akin to religion. A multiplicity of terms has been introduced in an attempt to capture this diversity and complexity, such as invisible religion, implicit religion, surrogate religion, quasi-religion, secular religion, and others. In short, the question of the boundaries of religion and therefore its definition is particularly crucial in the contemporary sociology of religion.

Sociologist Émile Durkheim described it with the ethereal statement that it consists of “things that surpass the limits of our knowledge”. He went on to elaborate: Religion is “a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, set apart and forbidden, beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community, called a church, all those who adhere to them”.

The above definition can be referred to as substantive in the sense that it tells us what religion is. The alternative to substantive definition is the functional definition which states what religion does. Durkheim’s definition contains a functional element in referring to religion uniting followers into a single moral community, the church. Functionalist definitions are often characterized as ‘inclusive’; that is to say, they include a broad range of phenomena within the concept. By implication, anything which performs the said function or operates in the said way counts as religion even if not conventionally thought as such. If religion is defined as that which promotes unity of social cohesion, then anything which does this is religion in terms of an alleged essential integrative role. In this case, systems of values and beliefs such as communism, fascism and nationalism are included in the category of religion.

The problem with this kind of definition is that it’s too broad. Secondly, it seems odd to include belief systems and ideologies which, like communism are specifically anti-

religious. For this reason, functional definitions should be avoided since they prejudge empirical questions which must be resolved by actual enquiry and investigation. If ideologies and belief systems such as communism and nationalism do share characteristics with religions or are found to play a similar social role, they might better be described by the term surrogate religiosity.

Our definition must embrace a polythetic approach rather than a monolithic approach. A polythetic definition is one that designates a set of things that share resemblances with one another but where no single or set of attributes is common to every member of the class. These family resemblances are such that while any particular instance will have in common a number of attributes with some members of the class, it may share no attribute in common at all with others. We can have the following attributes as prepared by Southwold (1978b):

- ✓ A central concern with godlike beings and men's relations with them
- ✓ A dichotomization of elements of the world into sacred and profane, and a central concern with the sacred.
- ✓ An orientation towards salvation from the ordinary conditions of worldly existence
- ✓ Rituals practices
- ✓ Beliefs which are neither logically nor empirically demonstrable or highly probable, but must be held on the basis of faiths – 'mystical notions' but without the requirement that they be false
- ✓ An ethical code, supported by such beliefs
- ✓ Supernatural sanctions on infringements of that code
- ✓ A mythology
- ✓ A body of scripture, or similarly exalted oral traditions
- ✓ A priesthood, or similar specialist religious rite
- ✓ Association with an ethnic or similar group

From the Latin *religio* (respect for what is sacred) and *Religare* (to bind, in the sense of an obligation), the term religion describes various systems of belief and practice concerning what people determine to be sacred or spiritual.

Religion can also serve as a filter for examining other issues in society and other components of a culture. For example, after September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks in the United States, it became important in North America for teachers, church leaders, and the media to educate citizens about Islam to prevent stereotyping and promote religious tolerance.

Some people associate religion with places of worship (a synagogue or church), others with a practice (confession or meditation), and still others with a concept that guides their daily lives (like dharma or sin). All of these people can agree that religion is a system of beliefs, values, and practices concerning what a person holds sacred or considers to be spiritually significant.

Throughout history, and in societies across the world, leaders have used religious narratives, symbols, and traditions in an attempt to give more meaning to life and understand the universe. Some form of religion is found in every known culture, and it is usually practiced in a public way by a group. The practice of religion can include feasts and festivals, God or gods, marriage and funeral services, music and art, meditation or initiation, sacrifice or service, and other aspects of culture.

While some people think of religion as something individual because religious beliefs can be highly personal, religion is also a social institution. Social scientists recognize that religion exists as an organized and integrated set of beliefs, behaviors, and norms centered on basic social needs and values. Moreover, religion is a cultural universal found in all social groups. For instance, in every culture, funeral rites are practiced in some way, although these customs vary between cultures and within religious affiliations. Despite differences, there are common elements in a ceremony marking a person's death, such as the announcement of the death, care of the deceased, disposition, and ceremony or ritual.

These universals, and the differences in how societies and individuals experience religion, provide rich material for sociological study.

In studying religion, sociologists distinguish between what they term the experience, beliefs, and rituals of a religion. Religious experience refers to the conviction or sensation that one is connected to “the divine.” This type of communion might be experienced when people are praying or meditating. Religious beliefs are specific ideas that members of particular faith hold to be true, such as that Jesus Christ was the son of God, or believing in reincarnation. Another illustration of religious beliefs is that different religions adhere to certain stories of world creation. Religious rituals are behaviors or practices that are either required or expected of the members of a particular group, such as bar mitzvah or confession.

HISTORY OF THE SOCIOLOGY OF RELIGION

When did it start and by who?

In the wake of 19th Century European industrialization and secularization, three social theorists attempted to examine the relationship between religion and society: Émile Durkheim, Max Weber, and Karl Marx. They are among the founding thinkers of modern sociology.

French sociologist Émile Durkheim (1858–1917) defined religion as a “unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things” (1915). To him, the sacred meant extraordinary—something that inspired wonder and which seemed connected to the concept of “the divine.” Durkheim argued that “religion happens” in society when there is a separation between the profane (ordinary life) and the sacred (1915). A rock, for example, isn’t sacred or profane as it exists. But if someone makes it into a headstone, or another person uses it for landscaping, it takes on different meanings—one sacred, one profane.

Durkheim is generally considered the first sociologist who analyzed religion in terms of its societal impact. Above all, Durkheim believed that religion is about community: it binds people together (social cohesion), promotes behavior consistency (social control), and offers strength for people during life's transitions and tragedies (meaning and purpose). By applying the methods of natural science to the study of society, he held that the source of religion and morality is the collective mindset of society and that the cohesive bonds of social order result from common values in a society. He contended that these values need to be maintained to maintain social stability.

Religion then provided differing degrees of "social cement" that held societies and cultures together. Faith provided the justification for society to exist beyond the mundane and partial explanations of existence as provided in science, even to consider an intentional future: "for faith is before all else an impetus to action, while science, no matter how far it may be pushed, always remains at a distance from this." (Durkheim 1915, p. 431).

But what would happen if religion were to decline? This question led Durkheim to posit that religion is not just a social creation but something that represents the power of society: when people celebrate sacred things, they celebrate the power of their society. By this reasoning, even if traditional religion disappeared, society wouldn't necessarily dissolve.

Religion performs the key function of providing social solidarity in a society. The rituals, the worship of icons, and the belief in supernatural beings "excite, maintain or recreate certain mental states" (Durkheim 1912) that bring people together, provide a ritual and symbolic focus, and unify them. This type of analysis became the basis of the functionalist perspective in sociology. He explained the existence and persistence of religion on the basis of the necessary function it performed in unifying society.

Whereas Durkheim saw religion as a source of social stability, German sociologist and political economist Max Weber (1864–1920) believed it was a precipitator of social change. He examined the effects of religious belief on economic activities and noticed that heavily Protestant societies—such as those in the Netherlands, England, Scotland, and

Germany—were the most highly developed capitalist societies and that their most successful business and other leaders were Protestant. In his writing *The Protestant Work Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1905), he contends that the Protestant work ethic influenced the development of capitalism by overturning the traditional anti-materialist Christian values of poverty.

Weber noted that certain kinds of Protestantism supported the pursuit of material gain by motivating believers to work hard, be successful, and not spend their profits on frivolous things. Material wealth was no longer seen as a sign of sin, but as a sign of God's favour.

Max Weber posited that, in Europe in his time, Protestants were more likely than Catholics to reflect the values of hard work and savings conducive to capitalist ideology. Focusing on Calvinism, he showed that Protestant values influenced the rise of capitalism and helped create the modern world order. Weber thought the emphasis on community in Catholicism versus the emphasis on individual achievement in Protestantism made a difference.

What does the concept of work ethic mean today? The work ethic in the information age has been affected by tremendous cultural and social change, just as workers in the mid to late 19th century were influenced by the wake of the Industrial Revolution. Factory jobs tend to be simple and uninvolved and require very little think decision-making making on the part of the worker. Today, the work ethic of the modern workforce has been transformed, as more thinking and decision making is required. Employees also seek autonomy and fulfillment in their jobs, not just wages. Higher levels of education have become necessary, as well as people management skills and access to the most recent information on any given topic. The information age has increased the rapid pace of production expected in many jobs.

Working hard also doesn't seem to have any relationship with Catholic or Protestant religious beliefs anymore, or those of other religions; information age workers expect talent and hard work to be rewarded by material gain and career advancement. As this is

becoming an empty promise for many in Western societies, especially youth, attention has turned to more critical analyses of the place and power of religion in society.

German philosopher, journalist, and revolutionary socialist Karl Marx (1818–1883) also studied the social impact of religion. He believed religion reflects the social stratification of society and that it maintains inequality and perpetuates the status quo. For him, religion was just an extension of working-class (proletariat) economic suffering: “Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people” (1844).

For Durkheim, Weber, and Marx, who were reacting to the great social and economic upheaval of the late 19th century and early 20th century in Europe, religion was an integral part of society. For Durkheim, religion was a force for cohesion that helped bind the members of society to the group, while Weber believed religion could be understood as something separate from society. Marx considered religion inseparable from the economy and the worker. Religion could not be understood apart from its ideological role in perpetuating or mystifying the inequalities of capitalist society. Despite their different views, these social theorists all believed in the centrality of religion to society.

How do sociologists progress?

The sociological study of religion is an interesting as well as a challenging enterprise. In analyzing religious practices, a sociologist must make sense of the many different beliefs and rituals found in the various human cultures. Sociologists must confront ideas that seek the eternal while recognizing that religious groups also promote quite mundane goals – such as acquiring finance or soliciting followers. There is a need to recognize the diversity of religious beliefs and modes of conduct but also probe into the nature of religion as a general phenomenon.

As we have noted above, sociologists define religion as a cultural system of commonly shared beliefs and rituals that provides a sense of ultimate meaning and purpose by creating

an idea of reality that is sacred, all-encompassing, and supernatural. From this we can single out three key elements of religion:

1. Religion is a form of culture – culture consists of the shared beliefs, values, norms, and ideas that create a common identity among a group of people. Religion shares all of these characteristics.
2. Religion involves beliefs that take the form of ritualized practices – all religions thus have a behavioral aspect – special activities in which believers take part and that identify them as members of the religious community.
3. Perhaps most important, religion provides a sense of purpose – a feeling that life is ultimately meaningful. It does so by explaining coherently and compellingly what transcends or overshadows everyday life, in ways that other aspects of culture such as the educational system or a belief in a democracy typically cannot.

As we have already noted, religion is the main source from which people have through the ages sought to construct a sense of meaning in their existence. We can look at three sociologists who tried to explain this reality.

Clifford Geertz

Geertz approaches this question from a cultural dimension from what he refers to as the cultural dimension of analysis. This means looking at religion as part of a cultural system. By cultural he means “a historically transmitted pattern of meaning embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms”. As part of the culture, religion deals in sacred symbols to “synthesize a people’s ethos – the tone, character, and quality of their life, its moral and aesthetic style and mood – and their world-view – the picture they have of the way things in sheer reality are their most comprehensive ideas of order”.

Geertz distinguishes two basic elements – a people’s ethos and their worldview. Sacred symbols or in other words religion play an important role in creating a world picture and

in relating it to the ethos. Ethos and worldview are mutually supportive. Religious symbols formulate a basic congruence between a particular style of life and a specific metaphysics and in doing so sustain each with the borrowed authority of the other. Based on this, Geertz defines religion as “a system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, persuasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic”. From this definition, we can deduce the following points.

He defines religion as a set of symbols. In this case, a symbol can either stand for something, represent or express something or it can act as a sort of blueprint or instruction for what to do. Religious symbols express the world and at the same time shape it. They shape the social world by inducing dispositions to behave in certain ways by inducing certain moods. For example, they may make worshippers solemn, reverential, and so on, or they may produce exultation, joy, or excitement. To achieve this, religion formulates concepts of general order which enhances the meaning of life as they reduce the risk of meaningless chaos in life. According to Geertz, there are three types of experiences that threaten to reduce the world to meaningless chaos – bafflement, suffering, and evil.

Bafflement is the experience that comes about when unusual or dramatic events occur, with which none of the normal means of explanation are competent to deal. Religion provides an ultimate answer as it explains the otherwise inexplicable by use of religious beliefs.

On suffering, Geertz opposes the view that religion helps people to endure suffering. According to him, the problem of religion is not how to avoid suffering but how to accept it, and how to make it sufferable.

The third type of meaning-threatening experience is that of evil. What is central here is the common feeling that there is a gap between things as they are and things as they ought to be. The good often suffers and the wicked prosper! In this case, religion attempts to make moral sense of experience, inequality, and of injustice. It attempts to show that these things

are only apparently the case and that if one takes a wider view, they do not fit into a meaningful pattern. A very common way in which this is done is, of course, to claim that injustices in this life are compensated for in the next.

Peter Berger

Berger argues that society is a dialectical phenomenon in that it is at one and the same time a human product and an external reality that acts back upon its human creators. The process by which we create our own social world through mental and physical activity, experience this social world as an external and independent reality, and find ourselves shaped by it, is one in which a meaningful order is imposed upon experience. Such a meaningful order Berger terms a '*nomos*'. The *nomos* is a social product; it is socially constructed. Anything that undermines social order becomes anomic. The *nomos* then is a shield against the terror that ensues when the world threatens to appear to be without order and meaning.

It is the religion that upholds this sense of the sheer reality and naturalness of the humanly constructed *nomos*. The *nomos* is, through religion, given a sacred character and become a sacred cosmos. It is sacred because it is seen as mysterious and vastly powerful. And since human-created *nomos* is precarious religious rituals serve as a reminder of the meaning embodied in them.

Religion does not simply legitimate and makes sense of the social order; it makes sense of experiences that might otherwise be disruptive and disordering. Because of its very power to overcome anomie, it is also one of the powerful forces of alienation in human life. It is the alienating power of religion that gives it its power to ensure stability and continuity of the tenuous formations of social reality.

Thomas Luckmann

Luckmann, a close associate of Berger, perceives religion as a coextensive with social life itself. In this case secularization is interpreted by him as a decline in traditional religious forms and institutions not in religion per se. As a social being, man will always be confronted by fundamental questions and problems that relate to what Luckmann refers to

as the dominant, overarching values, their social-structural basis and the functioning of these values in the life of the individual.

According to him, religion has underlying conditions which are universal aspects of human beings and of human life. These underlying conditions give rise to a whole variety of specific religious manifestations, that is to say particular religions and religious institutions, the specificity of which is related to prevailing circumstances in each case. Luckmann is however concerned with the religious impulse before it assumes its varied historical forms, each of which is just one way in which fundamental process in human life becomes institutionalized into a concrete form. Each is just one institutionalization of the general process by which a 'symbolic universe' is socially constructed and related to the world of everyday life.

Symbolic universes are systems of meaning by which everyday life is brought into relation with a transcendent reality. They are meaningful systems because they are socially constructed and supported. The process by which this comes about is possible only for beings which transcend their biological nature that is the human beings only, because they are self-aware and capable of reflecting on their experience. This helps them to see themselves as others see them and in the process they acquire a sense of self. Luckmann sees this process of the acquisition of a sense of self as essentially a religious process.

The central problem with this approach is that it is not clear why we should accept that the transcendence of biological nature is fundamentally a religious process. What is religious about it? Religion and socialization are closely interwoven in most traditional societies but it does not follow that socialization is inherently religious in character. Religion need not enter into the process. Even if Luckmann is right that what is distinctively human is the transcendence of biological nature and of self, and that this is what makes it possible for human beings to be moral creatures and to develop universalistic values, it does not follow that this makes human life inherently religious except by simply calling all this 'religion'.

THE SOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE OF RELIGION

The basic point is that society shapes our attitudes and behavior even if it does not determine them altogether. We still have freedom, but that freedom is limited by society's expectations. Moreover, our views and behavior depend to some degree on our social location in society—our gender, race, social class, religion, and so forth. Thus society as a whole and our own social backgrounds affect our attitudes and behaviors in reference to the Supreme Being.

In his research on the concepts of God in Africa, Mbiti noted that the attributes of God are based on their experience and socio-cultural context. Africans do not «make nor have they made physical representations of God. They use many anthropomorphisms and symbolisms from natural objects and phenomena to speak of God»¹. Mbiti further noted that there are many names of the Supreme Being derived from these attributes². There are

¹ J.S MBITI, *Concepts of God in Africa*, 14.

² We do not intend to look at all these attributes, for further knowledge, Cf. J.S MBITI, *Concepts of God in Africa*, 12.

two main areas of African culture where attributes of the Supreme Being are based: human life and the cosmos. Most of these attributes and their symbolic representations are based on their experience of life and their perception of the cosmos.

For example, the Abaluyia people of Kenya refer to God as *Wele* or *Were* which means one that steers or helps to steer. This attribute or metaphor is derived from Abaluyias's experience as fishermen in Lake Victoria. Successful fishing activity was perceived as a gift from the Supreme Being and therefore they referred to him as the Steer³. To the Abaluyia therefore, the name *Wele/Were* communicates to them more directly and concretely than any other name.

Our social backgrounds also affect one other important part of our lives, and that is our life chances—our chances (whether we have a good chance or little chance) of being healthy, wealthy, and well educated and, more generally, of living a good, happy life.

The influence of our social environment in all of these respects is the fundamental understanding that sociology—the scientific study of social behavior and social institutions—aims to present. At the heart of sociology is the sociological perspective, the view that our social backgrounds influence our attitudes, behavior, and life chances. In this regard, we are not just individuals but rather social beings deeply enmeshed in society. Although we all differ from one another in many respects, we share with many other people basic aspects of our social backgrounds, perhaps especially gender, race and ethnicity, social class and lastly religions. These shared qualities make us more similar to each other than we would otherwise be.

Does society totally determine our beliefs, behavior, and life chances? No. Individual differences still matter, and disciplines such as psychology are certainly needed for the most complete understanding of human action and beliefs. But if individual differences matter, so do society and the social backgrounds from which we come. Even the most

³ Cf. J.S MBITI, *Concepts of God in Africa*, 123.

individual attitudes and behaviors, such as the voting decisions, are influenced to some degree by our social backgrounds and, more generally, by the religion we adhere to and the society to which we belong. For example, we have heard of religion standing against particular proposals of the government and voting against it.

In this regard, consider what is perhaps the most personal decision one could make: the decision to take one's own life. What could be more personal and individualistic than this fatal decision? When individuals commit suicide, we usually assume that they were very unhappy, even depressed. They may have been troubled by a crumbling romantic relationship, bleak job prospects, incurable illness, or chronic pain. But not all people in these circumstances commit suicide; in fact, few do. Perhaps one's chances of committing suicide depend at least in part on various aspects of the person's social background. Some are also influenced by some religious conviction.

Understanding Society

Sociology regards individuals as social beings influenced in many ways by their social environment and perhaps less free to behave and think than we ordinarily assume. Max Weber once noted that a major goal of sociology is to reveal and explain "inconvenient facts" These facts include the profound influence of society on the individual and also, the existence and extent of social inequality.

In line with Weber's observation, as sociologists use the sociological perspective in their theory and research, they often challenge conventional understandings of how society works and of controversial social issues. This emphasis is referred to as the debunking motif, to which we now turn.

Peter L. Berger and The Debunking Motif

Berger presents the sociological perspective as a "form of consciousness" organized around four motifs (or themes). He describes "sociological consciousness" as a "transformation" of perspective which sees "in a new light the very world in which we have lived our lives," of "finding the familiar becoming transformed in its meaning." He says that the "first wisdom" of sociological consciousness is that "things are not what they seem," that social reality has "many layers of meaning." Thus, for Berger, the hallmark of sociological consciousness is the "ability to look at a situation from the vantage points of competing systems of interpretation." To do this, he, too, proposes specific guides by which to understand and recognize what he calls "sociological consciousness,"...namely, his four motifs. Sociological consciousness can be elucidated or brought forth by using Berger's motifs.

Berger calls the first theme the debunking motif. He calls this an "unmasking tendency," a "seeing through the facades of social structures," or what Nietzsche called the "art of mistrust." Berger contends that the roots of debunking are not psychological (i.e. peculiar to the individual), but rather, are methodological---a "logical imperative to unmask the pretensions and the propaganda by which men cloak their action with each other." He maintains that a debunking motif is inherent in sociological consciousness and is, in fact, presupposed by asking sociological questions. It is presupposed in the following three ways:

1. by being interested in looking some distance beyond the commonly accepted or officially defined goals of human action
2. by having a certain awareness that human events have different levels of meaning, some of which are hidden from the consciousness of everyday life
3. by having a measure of suspicion about the way in which human events are officially interpreted by the authorities, be they political, juridical, or religious in character

Finally, Berger links the debunking motif with the concept of ideology. He defines ideology as the ideas or views which serve to rationalize the vested interests of groups, ideas which "systematically distort social reality...", which are "unmasked as self-deception..."

Social Structure

One-way sociology achieves a more complete understanding of social reality is through its focus on the importance of the social forces affecting our behavior, attitudes, and life chances. This focus involves an emphasis on social structure, the social patterns through which a society is organized. Social structure can be both horizontal or vertical. Horizontal social structure refers to the social relationships and the social and physical characteristics of communities to which individuals belong.

The other dimension of social structure is vertical. Vertical social structure, more commonly called social inequality, refers to ways in which a society or group ranks people in a hierarchy, with some more "equal" than others. Such things as wealth, power, race and ethnicity, and gender help determine one's social ranking, or position, in the vertical social structure. Some people are at the top of society, while many more are in the middle or at the bottom. People's positions in society's hierarchy in turn often have profound consequences for their attitudes, behaviors, and life chances, both for themselves and for their children.

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES OF SOCIOLOGY

What is a theoretical perspective?

A theoretical perspective is a set of assumptions about reality that responds to the questions we ask and the kinds of answers we arrive at as a result. In this sense, a theoretical

perspective can be understood as a lens through which we look, serving to focus or distort what we see. It can also be thought of as a frame, which serves to both include and exclude certain things from our view. The field of sociology itself is a theoretical perspective based on the assumption that social systems such as society and the family actually exist, and that culture, social structure, statuses, and roles are real.

A theoretical perspective is important for research because it serves to organize our thoughts and ideas and make them clear to others. Often, sociologists use multiple theoretical perspectives simultaneously as they frame research questions, design and conduct research, and analyze their results.

We will review some of the major theoretical perspectives within the sociology of religion. Although all sociologists would probably accept the basic premise that social backgrounds affect people's attitudes, behavior, and life chances, their views as sociologists differ in many other ways.

Macro and Micro Approaches

There is one major theoretical and practical division within the field of sociology, and that is the division between macro and micro approaches to studying society. Though they are often viewed as competing perspectives, macro-sociologists focus on the big picture, which usually means such things as social structure, social institutions, and social, political, and economic change. They look at the large-scale social forces that change the course of human society and the lives of individuals.

Micro-sociologists, on the other hand, study social interaction. They look at how families, coworkers, and other small groups of people interact; why they interact the way they do; and how they interpret the meanings of their own interactions and of the social settings in which they find themselves. Often macro- and micro-sociologists look at the same phenomena but do so in different ways. Their views taken together offer a fuller understanding of the phenomena than either approach can offer alone.

Micro-sociologists examine the interaction of small groups of people, such as the two women conversing here. These sociologists examine how and why individuals interact and interpret the meanings of their interactions.

The different but complementary nature of these two approaches can be seen in the case of armed robbery. Macro-sociologists would discuss such things as why robbery rates are higher in poorer communities and whether these rates change with changes in the national economy. Micro-sociologists would instead focus on such things as why individual robbers decide to commit a robbery and how they select their targets. Both types of approaches give us a valuable understanding of robbery, but together they offer an even richer understanding.

Within the broad macro camp, we have two perspectives that dominate; functionalism and conflict theory/feminist theory. Within the micro camp, we have one other perspective; symbolic interactionism. We can now look at these theoretical perspectives on religion.

The Functionalist Perspective

The functionalist perspective also called functionalism, originates in the work of French sociologist Émile Durkheim, one of the founding thinkers of sociology. Durkheim's interest was in how social order could be possible, and how society maintains stability. Much of the work of Émile Durkheim stressed the functions that religion serves for society regardless of how it is practiced or of what specific religious beliefs a society favors. Durkheim's insights continue to influence sociological thinking today on the functions of religion.

First, religion gives meaning and purpose to life. Many things in life are difficult to understand. That was certainly true, as we have seen, in prehistoric times, but even in today's highly scientific age, much of life and death remains a mystery, and religious faith and belief help many people make sense of the things science cannot tell us.

Second, religion reinforces social unity and stability. This was one of Durkheim's most important insights. Religion strengthens social stability in at least two ways. First, it gives

people a common set of beliefs and thus is an important agent of socialization. Second, the communal practice of religion, as in houses of worship, brings people together physically, facilitates their communication and other social interaction, and thus strengthens their social bonds.

The third function of religion is related to the one just discussed. Religion is an agent of social control and thus strengthens social order. Religion teaches people moral behavior and thus helps them learn how to be good members of society. In the Judeo-Christian tradition, the Ten Commandments are perhaps the most famous set of rules for moral behavior.

A fourth function of religion is greater psychological and physical well-being. Religious faith and practice can enhance psychological well-being by being a source of comfort to people in times of distress and by enhancing their social interaction with others in places of worship. Many studies find that people of all ages, not just the elderly, are happier and more satisfied with their lives if they are religious. Religiosity also apparently promotes better physical health, and some studies even find that religious people tend to live longer than those who are not religious.

A final function of religion is that it may motivate people to work for positive social change. Religion played a central role in the development of the Southern civil rights movement a few decades ago. Religious beliefs motivated Martin Luther King Jr. and other civil rights activists to risk their lives to desegregate the South. Black churches in the South also served as settings in which the civil rights movement held meetings, recruited new members, and raised money.

The Conflict Perspective

The conflict perspective is derived from the writing of Karl Marx and assumes that conflicts arise when resources, status, and power are unevenly distributed between groups in society. According to this theory, conflicts that arise because of inequality are what

foster social change. From the conflict perspective, power can take the form of control of material resources and wealth, of politics and the institutions that make up society, and can be measured as a function of one's social status relative to others (as with race, class, and gender, among other things).

As we have seen above, religion has many benefits, but, according to conflict theory, it can also reinforce and promote social inequality and social conflict. Marx opined that religion enhances social strata in society thus maintaining inequality and the status quo. Because of this, he referred to religion as the “opiate of the masses”⁴

By this, he meant that religion, like a drug, makes people happy with their existing conditions. Marx repeatedly stressed that workers needed to rise up and overthrow the bourgeoisie. To do so, he said, they needed first to recognize that, their poverty stemmed from their oppression by the bourgeoisie. But people who are religious, he said, tend to view their poverty in religious terms. They think it is God’s will that they are poor, either because he is testing their faith in him or because they have violated his rules. Many people believe that if they endure their suffering, they will be rewarded in the afterlife. Their religious views lead them not to blame the capitalist class for their poverty and thus not to revolt. For these reasons, said Marx, religion leads the poor to accept their fate and helps maintain the existing system of social inequality.

Religion also promotes gender inequality by presenting negative stereotypes about women and by reinforcing traditional views about their subordination to men. As the Puritans’ persecution of non-Puritans illustrates, religion can also promote social conflict, and the history of the world shows that individual people and whole communities and nations are quite ready to persecute, kill, and go to war over religious differences. We see this today and in the recent past in central Europe, the Middle East, and Northern Ireland. Jews and other religious groups have been persecuted and killed since ancient times. Religion can

⁴ Marx, (1964). Marx, K. (1964). Karl Marx: Selected writings in sociology and social philosophy New York, NY: McGraw-Hill

be the source of social unity and cohesion, but over the centuries it also has led to persecution, torture, and wanton bloodshed.

News reports going back since the 1990s indicate a final problem that religion can cause, and that is sexual abuse, at least in the Catholic Church. An unknown number of children were sexually abused by Catholic priests and deacons in the United States, Canada, and many other nations going back at least to the 1960s. The Church hierarchy is accused of having done little or nothing to stop the abuse or to sanction the offenders who were committing it, and that they did not report it to law enforcement agencies. Various dioceses or religious congregations of the Church have paid tens of millions of dollars to settle lawsuits.

The Interactionist Perspective/ Symbolic Interactionism

The interactionist perspective was developed by American sociologist George Herbert Mead. It is a micro-theoretical approach that focuses on understanding how meaning is generated through processes of social interaction. This perspective assumes that meaning is derived from everyday social interaction, and thus, is a social construct. Another prominent theoretical perspective, that of symbolic interaction, was developed by another American, Herbert Blumer, from the interactionist paradigm. This theory focuses on how we use symbols, to communicate with each other; how we create, maintain, and present a coherent self to those around us, and how through social interaction we create and maintain a certain understanding of society and what happens within it.

In relation to religion, symbolic interactionism examines the role that religion plays in our daily lives and the ways in which we interpret religious experiences. For example, it emphasizes that beliefs and practices are not sacred unless people regard them as such. Once we regard them as sacred, they take on special significance and give meaning to our lives. Symbolic interactionists study the ways in which people practice their faith and interact in houses of worship and other religious settings, and they study how and why

religious faith and practice have positive consequences for individual psychological and physical well-being.

Religious symbols indicate the value of the symbolic interactionist approach. A crescent moon and a star are just two shapes in the sky, but together they constitute the international symbol of Islam. A cross is merely two lines or bars in the shape of a “t,” but to tens of millions of Christians it is a symbol with deeply religious significance. A Star of David consists of two superimposed triangles in the shape of a six-pointed star, but to Jews around the world it is a sign of their religious faith and a reminder of their history of persecution.

Religious rituals and ceremonies also illustrate the symbolic interactionist approach. They can be deeply intense and can involve crying, laughing, screaming, trancelike conditions, a feeling of oneness with those around you, and other emotional and psychological states. For many people they can be transformative experiences, while for others they are not transformative but are deeply moving nonetheless.

The table below gives the summary of the above perspectives and their major assumptions in relation to religion.

Theoretical perspective	Major assumptions
Functionalism	Religion serves several functions for society. These include (a) giving meaning and purpose to life, (b) reinforcing social unity and stability, (c) serving as an agent of social control of behavior, (d) promoting physical and psychological well-being, and (e) motivating people to work for positive social change.

Theoretical perspective	Major assumptions
Conflict theory	Religion reinforces and promotes social inequality and social conflict. It helps convince the poor to accept their lot in life, and it leads to hostility and violence motivated by religious differences.
Feminist theory	
Symbolic interactionism	This perspective focuses on the ways in which individuals interpret their religious experiences. It emphasizes that beliefs and practices are not sacred unless people regard them as such. Once they are regarded as sacred, they take on special significance and give meaning to people's lives.