

# Assess one sociological theory of religion



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**Using examples critically assess one sociological theory of religion**

In most traditional societies, religion is an important form of social 'togetherness'. It augments a feeling of 'community' and promotes a set of shared values and beliefs in some form of god. Religion also plays a central role in cultural life; people often synthesize religious symbols and rituals into the material and artistic culture of the society: literature, storytelling, painting, music, and dance. It is the focus of the 'society' that is of interest to religious sociologists, in particular theories concerning the way religious behaviour differs between and within societies. Beckford notes that theories 'revolving around 'how social interaction benefits or holds back societies', has made sociology a renowned area of study.

In order to establish a fundamental starting point in this thesis, the foundations of sociology and the sociology of religion will be described in context. Furthermore, it will discuss, in some detail, the sociological theoretical approach of functionalism by sociologists; a critical analysis will aim to show the differences in their approaches to functionalism and will include supporting and critical statements from preceding and subsequent sociological theorists. Sociologists generally define religion as a 'codified set of moral beliefs concerning sacred things and rules governing the behaviour of believers who form a spiritual community'. Auguste Comte (1798 - 1857) describes sociology as the study of human societies. A classical view is that, 'it is a social science' that, 'uses varied methods of empirical investigation and critical analysis', and is often used to develop theory about human social activity. The sociology of religion therefore takes into account the aforementioned and also includes the practices, historical backgrounds,

developments, universal themes and roles of religion in society. Jones (2003) describes Comte as the first to proclaim the virtues of an empirically based social science, a type of sociology that would have enormous implications for someone like Comte, who had been born during the aftermath of the French Revolution. Bilton et al (1996) explain this further:

- Positive social knowledge could offer the means for peaceful reconstruction of social order by the elite of enlightened scientists and intellectuals...Social change need not depend upon revolutionary violence and the manipulation of the mob'

Comte was able to make use of the new science for the progression of society and the re-establishment of order as well as being able to apply the positive method to social theory . Comte and his fellow Frenchman Durkheim are said to be the forerunners in creating the discipline of sociology.

Thompson (1982) describes Comte as ' giving the subject its name and an ambitious prospectus,' whilst Durkheim gave it, ' academic credibility and influence.'

Functionalist sociologists focus their attention on the ' nature of institutional relationships in society'. To understand this further, one can use Talcott Parsons' functionalist ideas as an example. Parsons, [who supported functionalism in the United States] used the functionalist perspective to group institutions in society into four related functional sub-systems; economic, political, kinship, and cultural. This theory stressed the importance of interdependence among all behaviour patterns and institutions within a social system to its long-term survival. In a similar way Durkheim In trying to explain the value of social and cultural character,

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illuminated them in terms of their contribution to the operation of an ‘overall’ system. Furthermore, Malinowski, who promoted functionalism in England, endorsed the idea that cultural practices had psychological and physiological functions, such as the reduction of fear and anxiety, and the satisfaction of desires. Another Englishman Radcliffe-Brown contended that, ‘all instituted practices ultimately contribute to the maintenance, and hence the survival, of the entire social system, determining the character of inter-group relations.’ It is Parsons ‘sub-system’ of culture that encompasses religion that we now turn to.

A functional definition of religion is fundamentally based on the ‘social structure’ and ‘drawing together’ of people, it pays particular attention to how religion guides and influences the lives of people who are actively involved, and through this promotes ‘unity and social cohesiveness’.

Durkheim believed and argued that, religion was a socially constructed institution, serving the needs of society by socialising members into the same norms, values and beliefs, therefore reinforcing the collective conscience upon which the stability of society rests. He looked in depth at the origins, meaning, and function of religion in society. His belief was that religion was not so much about God, but more about the consolidation of society and the sense of identity that this creates within a particular society. He fully believed that individuals who accepted their role within their own society develop a form of ‘social conscience’ as part of that role, which Durkheim labels as the ‘Conscience collective,’ which in simpler terms could be labelled as, ‘a common understanding’.

Published in 1921 and penned by Durkheim, 'The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life', is renowned as the best-known study on the sociology of religion. Using secondary data, Durkheim studied native totemism in primitive Australian tribes, in effect the totem is a symbol that is an integral part of the group, and during ceremonies will be the magnet that draws everyone together to form a collective whole. Therefore, totemism in this instance is explained not in terms of what it is, [what the content of its doctrines and beliefs are] – but what it does, that is, the function it performs for the social system. Durkheim claims that, 'the totem, the sacred object is a representation, by which society symbolises itself,' which according to Fulcher and Scott, he believed to be the 'real basis of social solidarity.' From his observations Durkheim developed his theory of the sacred and profane, believing that all things in society can be separated into these distinct categories, as a fundamental dichotomy the sacred and profane are seen as two separate domains or worlds. For Durkheim the sacred meant the unity of the group embodied in symbols, as in his example of totems, the profane was more about the mundane or the individual, and less concerned with the 'group'. However the British anthropologist Evans-Pritchard (1937) observed that sacred things may be profane at certain times, an example he gives is the case of the Azande, who, when their shrines were not in ritual use, were used as props to rest their spears. This analysis of the sacred and the profane was extended to all religions by Durkheim and his followers, making a focus on what is similar about what they each do, and about the integrative functions all these religions perform on their social systems. He therefore viewed religion within the context of the entire society and acknowledged its place in influencing the thinking and behaviour of the

members of society. Furthermore he believed that order flowed from consensus, from the existence of shared norms and values, for him the key cause of social upheaval stems from anomie, the lack of 'regulating' norms. 'Without norms constraining behaviour', explains Durkheim, 'humans develop insatiable appetites, limitless desires and general feelings of irritation and dissatisfaction.'

Radcliffe-Brown continued Durkheim's sociological perspective of society; he particularly focused on the institutions of kinship and descent and suggested that, at least in tribal societies, they determined the character of family organization, politics, economy, and inter-group relations. Thus, in structural-functional thought, individuals are not significant in and of themselves but only in terms of their social status: their position in patterns of social relations. When regarding religious ceremonies Radcliffe-Brown contends that ceremonies, for example, in the form of communal dancing, promoted unity and harmony and functioned to enhance social solidarity and the survival of the society, in this he agreed with another renowned anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski.

Malinowski's functionalism was highly influential in the 1920s and 1930s, a British anthropologist, he conducted one of the first major studies of religion from an ethnocentric perspective, on the people of the Trobriand Islands. The first anthropologist to undertake a long-term piece of field research, Malinowski lived among the Trobriand islanders for four years. In studying the functions of religion in a small scale, he agreed with Durkheim that 'religion reinforced social norms, values and promoted social solidarity.'

Malinowski also believed that religion could relieve social anxiety and could

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provide a sense of security especially when people are faced with situations in which they have no control, an example Malinowski gives is based on his observation of the Trobriand islanders fishing in a calm lagoon, no religious practice was attached, however when faced with the perils of fishing in the open ocean, religious rituals were always performed. In this way Malinowski believed humans could exert a perceived control over a world in which they held no significant, individual power. This individual, perceived control can be seen to be used by people facing a personal crisis. Often in a situation where they have no control over the outcome, people will turn to religion looking for guidance and sanctuary; thereby giving them a sense of power.

For Malinowski then, religion also helped to conciliate periods of life crises and events such as death, marriage and birth, these rituals, known as 'rites of passage' are marked by ceremonies, that by their very nature, are a form of 'social togetherness' that help to create social order and contentment.

These 'rites' however can be seen to be controlled in that to a certain extent one is prepared for new life, death and marriage, these events form part the 'circle of life' and therefore come with some prior knowledge. Ceremonies that relate to these life events could be seen as a 'predictable' common bond that will help to reinforce social solidarity. Malinowski argues that religion minimizes the disruption, in particular, of death. He believes that the assertion of immortality gives rise to feelings of comfort for the bereaved, whilst the act of a funeral ceremony binds the survivors together. Coser (1977) explains further:

- Religion can counter a sense of loss, which, as in the case of death, may be experienced on both the individual and the collective level

therefore religion as a social institution serves to give meaning to man's existential predicaments by tying the individual to that supra-individual sphere of transcendent values which is ultimately rooted in his society.

So far we have seen that collective or communal gatherings are generally aimed at promoting social solidarity and cohesion, this is backed by the empirical evidence offered by Malinowski in his study of the Trobriand Islands. Hamilton (1995) offers that these gatherings can also be interpreted as involving the ' recognition of divisions, conflict and disharmonies inherent in the society and rituals may be seen as a means of coping with and defusing them'.

Concerning Malinowski's empirical evidence, a contrasting point is noted by Casanova (1995) who questions functionalism on empirical grounds, he argues that religion does not provide consensus and unity, instead he says that most conflicts [an example he gives is the Iran/Iraq war] in society have religious foundations. Marxist sociologists also criticise functionalists on a theoretical level. Marx claims that religion does not create societal consensus, instead it creates conflict between those that have wealth in the ruling class and those that do not in the working class. Therefore according to Marx, the only norms and values that are conserved by religion are those of the ruling class. Functionalist theory could therefore be said to neglect the areas in which religion has been dysfunctional for society, whereby religious divisions have caused disruption and conflict rather than promoting social order. History provides numerous examples of this including the aforementioned Iran/Iraq dispute, Northern Ireland and Bosnia.



An “ Extreme functionalist assessment of religion,” declares William Stevens, is put forward by American sociologist Robert Bellah. Bellah fuses Parsons’ argument that America derives its values from Protestantism, with Durkheim’s belief that the worship of god is the disguised worship of society. From this Bellah develops a new kind of religious concept, that of a ‘ civil’ religion. Therefore despite the individual belief systems of American citizens, it is the overarching faith in America that unites Americans. Wallis (1983: 44) cited in Jones, explains that Bellah finds evidence of civil religion in Presidential inaugurations and ceremonials such as Thanksgiving Day and Memorial Day are similarly held to integrate families into the civil religion, or to unify the community around its values. A further point to be made here is that generally civil religion does not hold to a belief in the supernatural. Bellah disagrees and says examples of confirmation in the supernatural can be seen or heard on a daily basis, phrases such as “ God Bless America” and the words ‘ In God we trust’ on the national currency, he believes are prime examples of this. However Stevens asserts that this is not the god of any particular creed, but a god of America. For Bellah then civil religion creates a social cohesiveness by gathering people together to collectively partake in some form of ceremonial event. Therefore flag waving at a sporting event or lining the street to celebrate a royal marriage or death can bring about a united outpouring of joy or grief that in itself generates order. A contemporary example is the untimely death of Princess Diana. Her funeral witnessed a monumental combining of people, faiths and nations in a symbolic act of grief.

Functionalist sociologists tend to emphasize what maintains society, not what changes it and are criticized for being unable to account for social change because it focuses so intently on social order and equilibrium in society. Functionalists have to take into account that change does happen in societies and that change is a good thing, and can represent progress. Jones says that the functionalist way around this is to use an organic analogy – social progress occurs as it does with organisms – as an evolutionary change. Bilton et al explain that this takes shape in the form of structural differentiation... 'differentiation is a type of splitting or separation of a previously undivided unit, the new units differ in that they are more specialised in the functions they perform'. Talcott Parsons, in his approach to social change, emphasises differentiation. According to Parsons, 'Institutions change, if the need of the system changes.' An example of a system change stems from The Industrial Revolution, which was facilitated by capitalism, was increasingly demanding technological advances to increase profit. In order to make this possible there was a need for more educated workforces. As a result the industrial economy needed a new form of family to perform these specialist functions. Thus, as one aspect of society changed – the economy and production – it required a comparable change in the educational system, bringing social life back into equilibrium.

This new modernization of society, explains Marske, 'is associated with the increasing indifference of the individual from the traditional social bonds of an intimate network of diffuse social relationships.' Due to a greater demand in the workforce people from all walks of life came together causing an increase in the cultural diversity within a particular society. As a result

individuality became a more prominent feature; religion it seems was becoming less social and more personal. Durkheim would disagree with this statement as he believed it was possible to be an individual as well as social institution, he explains,

- In reality, the religion of the individual is a social institution like all known religions. It is society which assigns us this ideal as the sole common end which is today capable of providing a focus for men's wills.

Dillon (2003) explains that social scientists and Western intellectuals have been promising the end of Religion for centuries,

- Comte announced that, as a result of modernization, human society was outgrowing the 'theological stage' of social evolution and a new age was dawning which the science of sociology would replace religion as the basis or moral judgements.

Durkheim predicted the gradual decrease in formal world religions; in post-enlightenment society he felt that there would be a greater emphasis on the 'individual'. This he believed would lead to a 'weakening of ties' in the modern world. In addition he envisaged that 'social solidarity' and the 'collective conscience' would be taken up by other institutions that would evolve into new forms of religious experience. Furthermore a maturing modernity would see scientific thinking replace religious thinking. As a consequence, Durkheim considered the 'concept of "God" to be on the verge of extinction.

In its place he envisioned society as promoting civil religion, in which, for example, civic celebrations, parades, and patriotism take the place of church services. If traditional religion were to continue, he believed it would do so only as a means to preserve social cohesion and order. Parsons disagrees with this synopsis, 'with modern life will come structural frameworks that are more competitive and specialised, however they would still persist because religion is an adaptable structural framework for the explanation of inexplicable social phenomena.'

A criticism applied to the functionalist's perspective stems from Durkheim's analogy that societies and social institutions have personalities. To imagine that a 'society' is a living, breathing organism is a difficult concept when in fact it is seen as an inorganic object. This creates what can be said to be a philosophical problem and an ontological argument that society does not have needs as a human being does; and even if society does have needs they need not be met. The view here is that society is alive in the sense that it is made up of living individuals. What is not taken into account is that each individual is a different entity, with their own wants and needs. As part of the unit they can function and integrate within the group as a viable member. However individual life choices may not always create a positive function for the society as a whole. Functionalists in general tend to have a too positive view by believing that everything that exists in society does so because it has some kind of functional purpose. Robert Merton believed that it was entirely plausible for society to have dysfunctional elements. Durkheim also recognised that some forms of social life could be seen in the same way, however he did not use the term dysfunctional. In his work on crime, he

noted that crime was functional to society, this seems to be a contradiction in that he also said, 'too high a level of crime' might not be functional, because it could create a state of confusion regarding what constitutes the 'norms' that applied to people's lives. As a society dysfunctional actions, in particular criminal actions are frowned upon, and as a society we can become 'mob-handed' in the way people come together to condemn an act of crime. Durkheim has a point to make here in that, 'people combine together, forming a collective cohesion in defining themselves against what they are not.' Picturing society like a vast machine, Merton argues that a society should best be considered as a cross between the cultural "goals" of a society-what it holds its members should strive for-and the "means" that are believed, legally or morally, to be legitimate ways that individuals should attain these goals. In an ideally organized society, the means will be available to deliver all of its members to their goals.

One must take into account when analysing such theories that at the time of writing the world was a very different place to the one we live in today.

Social anthropology has come under criticism for looking into primitive societies as a representation of unchanged societies – criticism in particular stems from the lack of historical records that could confirm or deny any findings. Radcliffe-Brown considered this type of work a mistake...his belief was that the religious and ritual systems 'had to be understood in the context of the existing society and their role in that society.'

One could linger on Durkheim's prediction that religion would decrease with modernity, religion here being in reference to the act of attending a social gathering in the worship of some form, whether it be totemic or divine.

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However an important point to note is that at the time when the 'Sociology of Religion' was in its infancy, religious practice was more of a regular occurrence than one would perhaps find in today's society. However individuals are still irrevocably influenced by the role of religion in their own lives. Their beliefs and values allow them to feel supported in their everyday life; religion sets aside certain values and infuses them with special significance. Culture plays an important part here, as values, customs and beliefs combine to become a moral code by which societies adhere to and live by and pass on to future generations. Religion encourages collective worship be it in a church, mosque, temple, home or some other specified gathering place. Through the act of collective worship the individual is encouraged to feel part of a wider community.

Today, societies are classed as more secular in their nature, yet if one consider the earlier statement about religion being an important form of social 'togetherness' it would be easy to make analogies with the different groups that make up the society we inhabit. For example schools hold assemblies, awards evenings and performances all which can be seen as an example of community spirit and social cohesion. People as individuals, have interests outside of their immediate social groupings, this does not make them an outcast or outsider, and instead it promotes a sense of identity, individualism and the 'self'. The writings of sociologists such as Durkheim, Comte, Radcliffe-Brown and Parsons are still important today, especially in comparing the way society sees religion. However, in contemporary society sociologists have a different set of problems to contend with as belief in '

modern society' and 'materialism' for many becomes a more vital 'moral value' than partaking in a religious practice.

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