

How religion shapes society

Religion



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Not all religions share the same set of beliefs, but in one form or another, religion is found in all known human societies. Even the earliest societies on record show clear traces of religious symbols and ceremonies. Throughout history, religion has continued to be a central part of societies and human experience, shaping how individuals react to the environments in which they live. Since religion is such an important part of societies around the world, sociologists are very interested in studying it. Sociologists study religion as both a belief system and a social institution. As a belief system, religion shapes what people think and how they see the world. As a social institution, religion is a pattern of social action organized around the beliefs and practices that people develop to answer questions about the meaning of existence. As an institution, religion persists over time and has an organizational structure into which members are socialized. In studying religion from a sociological perspective, it is not important what one believes about religion. What is important is the ability to examine religion objectively in its social and cultural context. Sociologists are interested in several questions about religion: - How are religious beliefs and factors related to other social factors like race, age, gender, and education? - How are religious institutions organized? - How does religion affect social change? - What influence does religion have on other social institutions, such as political or educational institutions? Sociologists also study religiosity of individuals, groups, and societies. Religiosity is the intensity and consistence of practice of a person's (or group's) faith. Sociologists measure religiosity by asking people about their religious beliefs, their membership in religious organizations, and attendance at religious services. Modern academic sociology began with the study of religion in Emile Durkheim's 1897 *The*

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Study of Suicide in which he explored the differing suicide rates among Protestants and Catholics. Following Durkheim, Karl Marx and Max Weber also looked at religion's role and influence in other social institutions such as economics and politics. Sociological Theories Of Religion Each major sociological framework has its perspective on religion. For instance, from the functionalist perspective of sociological theory, religion is an integrative force in society because it has the power to shape collective beliefs. It provides cohesion in the social order by promoting a sense of belonging and collective consciousness. This view was supported by Emile Durkheim. A second point of view, supported by Max Weber, views religion in terms of how it supports other social institutions. Weber thought that the religious belief systems provided a cultural framework that supported the development of other social institutions, such as the economy. While Durkheim and Weber concentrated on how religion contributes to the cohesion of society, Karl Marx focused on the conflict and oppression that religion provided to societies. Marx saw religion as a tool for class oppression in which it promotes stratification because it supports a hierarchy of people on Earth and the subordination of humankind to divine authority. Lastly, symbolic interaction theory focuses on the process by which people become religious. Different religious beliefs and practices emerge in different social and historical contexts because context frames the meaning of religious belief. Symbolic interaction theory helps explain how the same religion can be interpreted differently by different groups or in different times throughout history. From this perspective, religious texts are not truths, but have been interpreted by people. Thus different people or groups may interpret the same Bible in different ways.

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