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Religion



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Sydney S. Writing Assignment #1 Soc 420 Sociology is concerned with human interaction. With that being said, the sociology of religion is also concerned with human interaction. In studying religion from a sociological perspective, one is looking at religion as a social institution and looking to answer questions such as: What effect does this particular institution have on the lives of its followers, how does this influence the upbringing of its followers, how does this religion affect the choices people make in their lives, how does this religion affect how its followers interact with and treat other people, etc. The questions raised by a sociologist, such as these, seek to answer what influence religion has on the way that people function as a part of society, as well as how society as a whole is influenced by this social institution and how these factors change over time (Johnstone, p. 2). A very important aspect of studying religion sociologically is doing so in an objective manner. As stated previously, studying religion sociologically entails looking at the effects of religion on society and on those who practice it. Therefore, a sociologist must learn to push aside any opinions on the actual religions and practices themselves (Johnstone, p. 5). One cannot express any opinions of whether particular religions are true or false, right or wrong, or good or bad. For example, let's imagine that there is a sociologist wanting to study the raising of children with Hindu families. If that sociologist openly feels that Hinduism is completely wrong, should not be practiced, and is based on false ideas and beliefs, that sociologist will not be able to do their job correctly. He or she will likely focus more on these opinions and their information will probably be very biased negatively toward the Hindu family life. The same thing goes for an opposite example. If a sociologist feels, for instance, that Catholicism is the only true religion and that all of its associated values,

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beliefs, and practices are what should be done by people, the study will be very biased. For this reason, the only way to accurately study religion sociologically is by doing so in a scientific manner (Johnstone, 2007). The sociology of religion is studied empirically, meaning that conclusions and findings are only based upon observable or measurable information (Johnstone, 2007). According to Ronald L. Johnstone, "... whatever elements of religion are spiritual or supernatural, in the sense that they cannot be seen with the eye or otherwise measured or recorded, are by definition beyond the purview of sociology" (Johnstone, 2007, p. 6). For example, a sociologist cannot do a study on the how praying makes God improve your life. For one thing, there is no observable, visual proof that this god exists. Also, the praying and its effects are not something that can be observed and measured. Because of this, sociologists use a scientific, sociological approach toward studying religion. The sociology of religion is a very important subject. This is because a large amount of the world practices a religion of some sort. According to Ronald L. Johnstone, "...some form of religion appears to be ubiquitous among societies, even if some individuals deny the validity of the religions that surround them. " (Johnstone, 2007, p. 36). People who are religious base their behaviors in life off of their religions. That's exactly what religion is- a way to live life based on what reward it will bring you during or after life. Since sociology is the study of the interaction of people and the functioning of societies, a large part of this has to do with religion. For example, maybe there is a place in which (hypothetically) sex is only allowed a certain number of times within the lifetime. Sociologists may wonder why their population was growing so slow, why there are no observable courtship behaviors, etc. Religion would hold the answers to

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these questions. Since religion is so prevalent around the world, sociologists need to look at it in order to understand societies as wholes. There exists a theory within the field of economics that attempts to explain what motivates people's economic functioning. The idea is that all human behavior can be described as rational, meaning that people rationally weigh the costs and benefits of doing certain things and not doing certain things (Scott, 2007). It is upon this rational weighing of costs and benefits that people decide what they will do, based on what has the greatest benefit for them and ideally at the lowest cost (Scott, 2007). This theory is called the rational choice theory. This theory can also apply to people's motivation for religious behaviors. People also engage (or don't engage) in a religion with the belief that it will bring them some sort of reward or benefits while being aware that this comes with certain costs to them (Johnstone, 2007). It is understood that a sociological view of religious groups has determined they are based on sets of established norms and values, practices, and role definitions (Johnstone, 2007). Rational choice theory explains that based on people's experiences in life with these elements, they rationally choose what they will and will not do in their life (Johnstone, 2007). For example, many people practice religion in the hopes that they will be helped by their god in tough situations in their life. So people do things such as praying, doing rituals, making offerings, paying church tithes, abstaining from certain "bad" behaviors, etc. In this case, the desired goal/reward is the help from the god and this comes at the cost of doing the religious practice routinely. If someone has done this so far in their life and they feel that whenever they need any help or are going through rough times and their god helps them and makes the situation, this person is going to keep doing these religious practices and all that their

religion entails. They have made a rational decision that the help they received from their god was worth all the time spent doing the religious practices. Now say that there is another person of the same religion that has been doing those same practices for a period of their life. This person goes through many trials and tribulations and never feels that there is any external force helping them through problems, answering their questions, or improving their life situations. This person may feel that they spend so much time doing religious practices and it never brings any benefit to their life. Well, according to rational choice theory, this person may decide not to engage in these behaviors anymore based on the rationality that it has brought them little reward at a great cost. This example shows how the rational choice theory also applies to people who consider themselves not to be religious. It is based upon the same rationality that makes a person decide to be religious. References Johnstone, R. L. (2007). Religion in society: A sociology of religion (8thth ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education. Scott, J. (2000). Understanding contemporary society: Theories of the present. In Rational choice theory. N. p.: Sage Publications.