

Free critical thinking on definition of religion (chapter 1)

[Religion](#)



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Any study focusing on religion should begin with a definition of the concept. However, the term religion assumes different meaning depending on perspective of people. In his book, *Religion in society: A sociology of religion*, Johnstone Ronald takes a sociological perspective in defining religion. The author defines religion as “ a system of beliefs and practices by which a group of people interprets and responds to what they feel as sacred and, usually supernatural as well” (Johnstone 13). Johnstone derives the meaning of religion from the Latin word ‘ Religare’ meaning, ‘ to bind together,’ pointing to the concept of fellowship or a group (7). The definition presented by Johnstone strengthens the general agreement that religion depends on belief and practice, and is a universal social phenomenon, which affects human beings. This is evident from the fact that religious activities do increase during periods of great uncertainty and suffering, for example during natural calamities. Many people resort to religion for purpose and meaning as well as provide a framework for identity. It therefore correct to agree with the social perspective used by Johnstone in defining religion because it affects human beings and that human beings are social animals.

Rational Choice Theory (chapter 2)

Rational choice theory (RCT) dates back to 1961 when sociologist George Homas laid the basic theory of exchange. The theory attempts to explain deviant and conforming social behaviors in terms of how individuals make choices based on their preferences. According to the book, RCT is a theory based on the premise that that people try to maximize their rewards and minimize their costs. According to the theory, people make choices based on limited information, constraints or bounded choices, and even individual

preferences. Johnstone argues that the idea of a “religious marketplace” fits well with the RCT framework. The author asserts that people do not simply decide to remain or join a particular religious organization because they have been socialized into it or due to pressure from family and friends, but rather that they weigh costs and benefits in determining the right religious group (Johnstone 123). It turns out that there is a serious flaw in maintaining such viewpoint. Attempts to use economic logic to explain religious affiliations where application of sociology or other related field might be more effective.

The Bureaucratization of Religion (chapter 3)

According to Johnstone (150), religion became reutilized when oligarchies replaced charismatic leadership. Both the internal and external processes of churches are marked by bureaucratization. Bureaucracy has permeated the internal operations of religious institutions as 20 percent of church members control 80 percent of the church activities. Normalization of church activities have led to emergence of hierarchies characterized by vertical structure and reliance on official knowledge. Externally, religious institutions deal with each other as well as other social institutions through bureaucratically interactions. Additionally, there is increase in division between the laity and ordained ministries. According to Park (62) bureaucracies demand specific types of personnel. These specific requirements are not only limited to required skills and functions, but also in terms of psychological requirements. As always the norm, bureaucratic institutions both select and make the type of personnel they require. This also applies to many religious institutions regardless of the traditional pattern of bureaucracy. The requirements of bureaucracy do not take into account factors such as

traditional differentiations of religious leadership (Johnstone 214). Johnstone presents a valid argument regarding bureaucratization of religion in the world because the problem is facing all peoples of faith everywhere.

Terms: ‘sect’, ‘church’, ‘denomination’, and ‘cult’ (chapter 4)

Johnstone defines sects as modern religious groups formed with the aim of protesting to their parent religion, usually denomination (Johnstone 231).

They usually base their actions in accusations of heresy in the parent denomination. In many cases, the sects decry liberal trends in denominational development and advocate for a return to true religion.

Ironically, leader of sectarian movements usually come from lower social class than the members of the parent denomination. Johnstone asserts that in cases where formation of the sect results into class disparity, they may try to compensate for the deficiency.

Johnstone asserts that church is the first type of religion and that religion of this type are the guardians of religions for all members of the society and do not tolerate religious completion. This definition presented by Johnson does not apply to modern churches that emerge daily due to the increased need for autonomy among people who believe that they can also form their own churches. Denomination on the other hand emanates from the inability of the churches to maintain their monopoly of the society (Gladwell 102). It represents one religion among many. Johnstone maintains that major religious bodies such as Methodist, Baptist, and Lutherans are examples of denominations. Cults on the other hand are new religious groups only that they are not necessarily formed because of break off from another religious

group (Bates 74). Johnstone gives a clear description of these terms in an manner that is easy to understand and provides concise information (312).

Johnstone's "Elements in Religious Socialization" (chapter 5)

Johnstone defines religious socialization as the process through which new generations gradually acquire religious ideas and values from older generation (321). This process involves the actions of conscious agents, partly with varying agendas: society, parents, and religious organizations. In his book, Johnstone suggests that there is a strong evidence of unsuccessful religious socialization. Evidently, throughout the world, churches and other religious institutions lose participants and members. This may be because efforts towards religious socialization in churches, families, and schools have not been successful in recruiting members for churches and denominations. Johnstone on the other hand maintains that agents of socialization differ across religious traditions, with some regarding religion as a cultural or ethnic category, making it difficult for individuals to break from religious affiliations (Johnstone 73). The assertions by Johnson that the ability of new generations to acquire religious ideas and values from older generations may not hold true because the new generation is very dynamic with some of them being too rebellious to accept old religious beliefs.

Conflict Theory (chapter 6)

Conflict theory highlights the role of power and coercion in producing social order. This theory was introduced by Karl Marx, who saw society as a division between groups that compete for economic and social resources. The perspective of social order is maintained through domination, with those with

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the greatest economic, political, and social resources holding the power. When viewed in the context of religion, Marx's theory maintains that capitalism dominates the working class. Johnstone asserts that religion perpetuates conflict because religion provides explanation for state of inequalities and often will perpetuate them by giving the divine sanction.

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