

Conflict and functionalist theories in religion sociology essay



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“ The difference between conflict and functionalist theories on religion are:

*Conflict theory refers to religion as “ the sigh of the oppressed creature, the sentiment of a heartless world, and the soul of the soulless condition. It is the opium of the people”.

Functionalism is a structural-consensus perspective that views society as a system. As its name implies this theory seeks to define the separate institutions of society in terms of how they function to maintain the social system. It should be noted that sociological research into religion does not attempt to reveal the mysteries of the supernatural, however whilst seeking to understand the role of religion within society some theorists have been drawn to rather unfaithful conclusions.

Emile Durkheim, the founding father of functionalism, claimed that all societies divide the world into the sacred and the profane. He observed that even seemingly ordinary objects, for instance a wooden cross, could provoke deep emotions, though they held no intrinsic power. For Durkheim the significance of such objects was symbolic, and for Durkheim the wooden cross did not represent sacrifice and eternal salvation, as with all religious iconography it represented the ‘ collective conscience’, the shared set of beliefs that bind society together.

One common way to define religion is to focus on what are known as functional definitions: these are definitions which emphasize the way religion operates in human lives. When constructing a functional definition is to ask what a religion does – usually psychologically or socially.

Functional definitions are so common that most academic definitions of religion can be categorized as either psychological or sociological in nature. Psychological definitions focus upon the ways in which religion plays a role in the mental, emotional, and psychological lives of believers. Sometimes this is described in a positive way (for example as a means of preserving mental health in a chaotic world) and sometimes in a negative way (for example as with Freud's explanation of religion as a type of neurosis).

Functionalists argue that the role of religion is to preserve the status quo rather than to promote social change. They agree that religion is a beneficial conservative force because it maintains consensus, binds people together and promotes social order. They however see it as having a positive influence, whereas the Marxist view is somewhat more negative in its outlook. (Especially when looking at social change)

It is impossible to see how religion can be functioning to socialise the majority of societies members into morality, and integration in the 21st century, when only a minority of people attend church and of course when some of the attendees these days engage in anti moral and antisocial behaviour and to a large extent sizeable percentage of people especially the young teens are been exposed to some of these moral dangers. Having said this, it could be observed that functionalists tend to neglect the areas in which religion has been dysfunctional for society for example in Northern Ireland and Bosnia, religious divisions have caused disruption and conflict rather than promoted social order.

Another pertinent point that can be argued is that the post modernist believes that the old sociological searches for the grand explanations of social behaviour and values are pointless. They believe there are no absolute truths, and values in society are only relative ones, this is due to the fact that society is more fragmented due to modernisation, and there are also various ideologies to choose from. Along with this added choice non-traditional beliefs and behaviours are being adopted. People now select their beliefs like they select lifestyles and leisure activities, a good example is the concept of consumerism.

This shift away from the traditional has a huge impact on religion according to postmodernists. Religion no longer holds the role of promoting social solidarity and social order that the functionalists argue to be the case. Instead religion has become a personalised entity; it has become pick and mix in a sense. People are becoming more aware and open to new ideas; this could explain the growth in new religious movements.

Religion has to shift according to the needs of the people in different social contexts. Theologically, from the bible for instance God recommended in the institution of marriage a unique and acceptable union between a man and a woman in the book of Genesis which has served as a standard for a while in some part of the world but as a result of man's insatiable quest for new ideas, experience and adventure we now have what we call " gay marriage" which many countries are now institutionalised and drafted into the constitutional right of the citizenry.

Undoubtedly, religion had a prominent position in early functionalism.

According to Comte, the macrofunctionalist, it prompted simple folk to serve unseen purposes that even clever scholars could barely detect. Durkheim (1912) proposed that religion sacralised social life itself and, because the perspective of society was implicit in all cognition, religion thus served as the foundation of all knowledge. The micro functionalist Malinowski (1948 [1925]) observed that religion established, fixed, and enhanced individual attitudes that were valuable to the collective existence and survival of societies-attitudes such as reverence for tradition, harmony with the environment, and courage in the struggle with difficulties and at the prospect of death.

However, many of these functions that used to be the hallmark of religion could no longer uphold the central pillar of the society canon that seems to be falling apart or perhaps, eroding. The Irish society can be cited as an example of a dedicated religious state for many decades, which as a result serve as a way of modelling and tailoring people in a particular direction of social values and norms but unfortunately in today's world all of these norms and values are eroding speedily and consequently peoples' way is now perverse, the act of terrorism is now a lifestyle, statistic has revealed alarming rate of people committing or about to commit suicide due to issues related to emotion stress and financial issues just to mention a few, basically these are some of the hole that religion used to fill perfectly in the heart of people.

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Nevertheless, it is also true that from the fundamental perspective that religion could relieve social anxiety, that it could provide a sense of security when people are faced with uncontrollable situations. Malinowski observed that when the islanders fished in the 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.

Apparently, this is not really the case anymore why because the greatest problem of insecurity that is most imminent all over the world now can be traced to the fragmented religion sect been propagated Islamic fundamentalist which has changed the world order and shaped how we lived our lives tremendously and consequently create a tense and uneasy atmosphere rather than the secure, hopeful and serene expectations postulated by functionalist school of thoughts.

Perhaps the most extreme functionalist assessment of religion has been put forward by the American sociologist Robert Bellah. Bellah has fused Parsons argument that America derives its values from Protestantism and added that to Durkheim's belief that the worship of god is the disguised worship of society creating the concept of a 'civil religion'. Bellah believes that what unifies Americans, whichever religion they may be is an overarching civil religion; a faith in Americanism and not necessarily need not contain supernatural belief, Bellah maintains that in America it does. For instance "God Bless America" is a common phrase, American Presidents swear an oath before god and American currency pronounces to the world "In God We <https://assignbuster.com/conflict-and-functionalist-theories-in-religion-sociology-essay/>

Trust". However this god is not the god of any particular creed but a god of America. In this respect faith in America unites all the American peoples.

CONCUSION

In analyzing religion, functionalists argue that religions serve a number of functions, such as: they preserve and integrate society, create communities of believers, promote social control, provide answers to ultimate questions, provide us with rites of passage, and cultivate social change. Religions may also be dysfunctional in some respects. The conflict perspective suggests that religion is a tool used by the elite to subjugate the masses.

The functionalist and conflict perspectives have a number of practical applications, such as providing a link to the understanding of an entire culture and learning much about a particular community. Not least Durkheim's prediction of the 'cult of man'. Certainly modern religious phenomena such as having a 'personal relationship with Jesus', religious trends such as Wicca or even the rise of the tele-evangelist are evidence that religion is becoming less social and more personal. Whether this is mere coincidence or proof of Durkheim's prediction is at the very least debatable, but surely it is the human ability to question and wonder that initially gave rise to religion.

Apparently, in the times past religion as the functionalist postulated as served as a unifying factor, dictator of status quo, canon of values, bind people together, promote social order and so on in many society but things are changing fast, religion has become so fragmented not only to the extent of eroding the social values that it stood for in the hands of radical

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fundamentalists to perpetrate terror in the name of religion but it has also facilitate uncountable exposure of people especially the young teens who are vulnerable to diverse moral dangers, the rapid cases of paedophiles across the western hemisphere is a good example.

Basically, vast majority of people have lost faith and hope in what used to be a unifying force in the society, people have been wounded both emotionally and psychologically. Rather than binding people together and promoting social order, religion has left more people in a state of disillusioned. It can be aptly concluded that universal functional need can neither be served by religion nor can religion be the sole survival and sustainers' of any system in a modern society as once believed by the functionalist scholars.

People now have individualistic adoration as against the universal religion that used to determine the way we think, react and live in terms of our value system and one of such things is sport specifically football which has suddenly turned to some kind of "god". Obviously, there is a paradigm shift from the old values that used to hold any societal system together from the functionalist view to the modernistic era where technology and other things now determine value system.