

Definitions of Religion

Sacred = According to Durkheim, this is his notion of religion...which he defines as "things set apart and forbidden" ie. things held on a higher level than everyday (profane) things. This view of religion is an 'inclusive one'.

Profane = Opposite of sacred (for Durkheim). It refers to everyday, ordinary things ie. things not to do with religion (the sacred realm).

Inclusive definition of religion = This refers to a catch-all, liberal view of religion. Under such definition, many non-traditional belief systems may be regarded as religions by virtue of their function (eg. civil religions such as Nationalism, the Queen's Coronation, even sport).

Surrogate Religion = This is a substitute religion (very similar to civil and inclusive definitions of religion) such as football or nationalism which serve to perform religious functions.

Civil Religion = This inclusive definition of religion (used by Shils/Young) regards civic ceremonies or major social events as religions by virtue of their functions. Examples would be the Queen's Coronation, 4th July celebrations in the USA, the Cenotaph and the importance of Lenin's tomb in Moscow.

Belief system = beliefs which form part of our 'universe of meaning'....some prefer to use this rather than religion because it is a more general view which includes traditional religious beliefs but also takes on board Nationalism or even science.

This-worldly = Adjective that refers to things in this world (the physical world). Some religions may be described as such because they are not concerned about the afterlife eg. naturism, Confucianism.

Other -worldly = Most religions tend to be thus, as they are concerned with the afterlife, ie. the realm beyond the physical world.

Empirical realm = linked to the physical world in the here-and-now that can be observed, measured ie. the physical world.

Metaphysical realm = this refers to the spiritual world ie. the realm beyond the physical (natural) world....that cannot be physically observed or measured.

Substantive definition of religion = This refers to what religion is rather than what it does ie. the content of religion. Such a definition is a traditional one mainly about the supernatural/spiritual realm.

Functional definition of religion = This is about the functions of religion ie. what it does, rather than about doctrines. In this sense, anything may be a religion if it serves certain key functions of religion. This is a more inclusive definition of religion.

Pre-modern society = This refers to medieval times before the Enlightenment period where religious beliefs serve as the man 'universe of meaning'.....science hasn't really taken hold yet.

Modernity = Modern times referring to the period where science and the Enlightenment period predominate. This is the period of the Industrial revolution and due to the influence of science, rationalisation takes over and there is less faith in religious, supernatural beliefs (mid-19th century to late modernity in the 2nd half of the 20th century).

Postmodernity = Some commentators (postmodernists) believe that we have transcended modern times, lost our faith in science and gone to a stage beyond where there are no universal truths (as science claims). Everything is relative. We are in a 'pick 'n' mix culture where it is difficult to track and define religion.

Totemism = the simplest, basic form of religion (identified by Durkheim), and therefore arguably the essence of what a religion is. A totem is a symbol and totemism is the worship of an object that symbolises something sacred (see Durkheim).

Superstition = This refers to the existence of an unseen and unknown mysterious force (often irrational) which can influence a person's life for good or ill. Rituals are usually performed to influence the outcome of an event. Because they are a belief system, they may be seen as a religion in an inclusive way.....which raises important issues in the secularisation debate. Don't most people have some superstition ?

Church = in sociological thinking, this does not refer to the building, but to institutional religion (any religion) ie. the main religion of a society associated with the state. Hence in Britain, the Anglican Church ; in Italy, Roman Catholicism.

Denomination = This represents a splinter group from the established church religion (eg. Baptism or Methodism in Britain.), with slightly varying doctrines away from the mainstream Church view. Existent mainly in the USA where there no established Church.

Sect = a small, voluntary, exclusive and radical religious group demanding total commitment from its followers and emphasising separateness from mainstream society. Eg. Jehovah's Witnesses ; Plymouth Brethren.

Cult = similar to a sect, but they are more concerned with finding new ways to salvation rather than a return to old ways. Often based around the discovery of a new prophet eg. the Moonies (Rev. Moon) , Jim Jones 'People's Temple'. Mainly associated with a bad press and used pejoratively with negative connotations ; hence the use of 'destructive' or 'doomsday'cult.

New Religious Movements (NRMs) = a broader term referring to sects and cults (more appropriate to use when distinguishing between a sect and a cult may be difficult).

Functionalism and Religion

Manifest Function = the intended purpose of something. The manifest function of religion is to provide comfort, guidance and an explanation of events for those who believe.

Latent Function = the unintended effect (usually positive) of something (in this case religion) on society. This is the area that Durkheim emphasises in his research when he says that the real object of reverence in worship is society. In following religious rituals, individuals are bound and integrated into social (religious) communities, share a moral consensus and this therefore generates greater social cohesion/solidarity.

Social integration = the main function of religion according to Functionalists.....binding individuals into society.

Social Solidarity/social cohesion/ social cement = these are all very similar terms suggesting the consensual nature of religion for those who belong to a group and have shared values. By practising religious rituals together, close bonds are established which unite society and maintain harmony.

Mechanical solidarity = Durkheim's notion about how simple, small tribal societies were held together through religion. By doing the same things (including rituals) and following the same

beliefs , social cohesion is created. This may not be possible in large, complex multi-faith societies where shared values do not exist.

Rituals = These are social ceremonies (certain formal actions) performed which are primarily symbolic. For Durkheim, these were more important (in binding communities together) than the actual beliefs or doctrines of a religion.

(Structural) Differentiation = this is related to the notion of 'loss of functions'. It is the historical process whereby social structures (in this case religion) have evolved and become increasingly specialised in their role. Therefore Parsons does not believe that religion has diminished with modernity, but that it has taken on a purer, more specialised role (needed in times of crisis). This offers a critique of secularisation theory.

Rites of passage = refers to rituals performed to mark key stages of one's life eg. birth, death, marriage etc. These are regarded as important for Functionalist in religious terms though critics would argue that the religious purpose behind such rituals has been long lost.

Marxism and Religion

Ideology = a systematic set of beliefs promoted , usually to the benefit of a dominant social group (this dominant group may be the ruling class , or even men). Conflict theorists see religion as thus.

Opium of the masses = Marx's description of religion, a metaphor that suggests the way in which social and economic reality is distorted by religion. Also, as an opium, religion acts as a painkiller to the suffering arising out of being an exploited working class group. Like a drug, the comfort generated from religion is illusory. Lenin used a similar term ('spiritual gin').

Myths = similar to ideology, but these are beliefs that cannot be substantiated. Marxists see religion as a series of myths.

Legitimation = The process by which power and control by the dominant social group is justified through beliefs such as religion eg. the notion in feudal times of the 'divine right of kings' ; also note the placid acceptance by Untouchables of a deeply entrenched, exploitative caste system headed by Brahmins that has existed for centuries....and which is legitimated through the notion of ascribed status.

Superstructure = In Marxist thinking, this refers to all other cultural/political aspects of society other than the economic base or infrastructure....in this case religion.....which is used to reinforce and maintain existing (and exploiting) economic relations in society.

Ideological state apparatus = Althusser's idea which refers to the way in which ideology is one of the more effective tools to dominate people (through ideas).

Social control = the maintenance of social order....achieved through ideology...to maintain the existing status quo.

Status quo = things as they are now ; the existing system.

False consciousness = a Marxist term that applies well to the role of religion. As stated before, religion disguises the true nature of economic reality so that the working classes, through religion (and in other ways), are not aware of their exploitation.

Feminism and Religion

Social opium = this refers to the ideological nature of religion, but goes beyond Marx's idea (referring to class) and in this case, applies to gender.

Patriarchal ideology = a systematic set of ideas promoting male dominance (Feminists believe religion plays this role).

Phenomenology and Religion

Social construction of reality = Berger/Luckmann's term outlining the notion that reality is not an objective phenomenon, but is produced by social actors subjectively interpreting and giving meaning to the world around them. Religion is a major device used by humans to give meaning to the social world.

Universe of meaning = a belief system used to make sense of the world. Religion is a universe of meaning, as is science.

Plausibility structure = any universe of meaning requires a plausibility structure if a belief system is to be sustained. If religion doesn't deliver, then its credibility, or plausibility, is lost. In this case, Azande beliefs about witchcraft must work for them, otherwise such beliefs wouldn't continue to exist.

Postmodernism and Religion

Meta-narrative = A grand theory or over-arching belief. Postmodernists don't believe that meta-narratives exist ie. there is no universal truth out there. Any generalised statements about the existence of secularisation, or links between religion and social change are rejected by Postmodernists.

Detraditionalization = Giddens' view that in a postmodern society, traditions lose their significance as more and more cultures and beliefs become available.

Hybrid culture = a fusion of religious cultures that arises in a postmodern society, forming a new synthesised culture eg. Moonie beliefs, drawing upon Hinduism, Buddhism and Christianity ; NAMs drawing upon a mixture of East and West.

Pick 'n' mix Culture = Rather than creating a hybrid or fusion, individuals may pick up different elements from different aspects of society. Religion may be part of that culture, which individuals may fleetingly adopt.

Religion and Social Change

Social Change = Change from one type of society (or a feature of society) to another.....often referring to the change from pre-industrial feudalism to industrial capitalism (see Weber's work). But it can refer to change involving a movement towards greater black civil rights.

Conservative force = preventing social change; maintaining traditions; preserving the status quo.

Protestant Ethic = the austere hard-working culture (religious ideas) promoted by Calvinism (as a specific aspect of Protestantism) that Weber believed was instrumental in bringing about capitalism

Spirit of capitalism = a set of ideas, ethics and values promoting capitalism and the culture of capitalism (Weber believed that Protestantism did this)

Salvation anxiety = the concern that Protestants had about being 'saved' and going to heaven as opposed to being damned to hell.

The Chosen; the Called = those who were seen as virtuous and would go to Heaven

Liberation theology = religious doctrines that are used to bring about social freedom for oppressed groups (mainly in terms of class and race), particularly as practised by Roman Catholic priests in Latin America. These radical movements challenge the status quo.

Economic determinism = the Marxist notion that all social relations (including religion) are inevitably tied up with the economy and the infrastructure.

Idealism = the (Weberian) notion that ideas (eg. religious ideas) alone may be enough to bring about social change...this view forms the basis of Weber's work on the protestant Ethic

Materialism = this is a contrasting (Marxist) idea that ideas alone are not enough to bring about social change.....the material circumstances (economic conditions ; technological capacity) have to be developed for social change to occur.....ie. reinforces the idea of economic determinism

Secularisation Theory

Religiosity = one's level of religious feeling or religiousness.

Secularisation = the decline of religion over time...ie. it is a comparative notion (less religious than in the past) which raises questions not only about today, but about the levels of religiosity in the past. Bryan Wilson's definition covers many aspects of secularisation.

Disengagement = A feature of secularisation : it is the process by which the state and the church become increasingly separate and distinct entities, with a corresponding loss of power and influence of the Church over the state. Divorce legislation, Sunday Trading laws would illustrate this trend. Contrast this with Iran where Islamic laws are state laws.

Disenchantment = Weber's notion describing the process whereby supernatural mystical and magical explanations about the world are being displaced (by science).

Rationalisation = a movement towards reason, logic and science as explanations for the world. This is a feature of modern societies that have less faith in supernatural explanations.

Religious pluralism = the rise in the number of religious organisations emerging. Some see this as a transformation of religion ; others see it as a sign of the weakening or dilution of religion as a truly religious society has only one faith and one church.

Societalization = Steve Bruce's idea that as a result of modernisation, social life becomes increasingly fragmented with a loss of close-knit communities. This is said to undermine religion.

Non-authentic religion = Herberg's description of sectarian religion, (especially in America) which he sees as shallow and not very genuine.

Anti-Secularisation Theory

Resacrilisation = a return to a belief in the sacred ; the opposite of secularisation. Hence some believe that NRMs signify resacrilisation rather than a decline of religion.

Televangelism / TV evangelism = The spread of evangelism (conversionist , preaching religions) through television....increasingly popular in the USA but less so in Britain. Steve Bruce does not see them as being that significant in the USA because they tend to preach to the already-converted.

Individuation = Bellah's term describing the process of privatised worship on an individual basis. This challenges Wilson's idea that you can measure secularisation via church attendance figures.

Transformation = change, as in the argument that religion hasn't declined but merely changed its form in modern society.

New Religious Movements

World-Rejecting sects = Wallis' sub-division of a sect....this type are critical of the outside world, seek social change, are based upon a communal lifestyle and therefore exclusive (often accused of brainwashing) eg. the Moonies.

World-Accommodating Sects = Wallis' 2nd category of sect. They seek to restore the spiritual purity to a religion which has been lost in mainstream religion eg. Jehovah's Witnesses (protest against the commercialisation of Xmas), evangelical (and 'born again') Christians, Pentecostalism. Members do not need to separate themselves from the rest of society to pursue their faith.

World-Affirming Sects = Wallis' 3rd category of sect. There is little social control over members and they often seek to solve worldly problems such as hunger, crime. Eg. Transcendental Meditation.

Relative deprivation = A subjective feeling of deprivation, not necessarily material but spiritual. This is a reason why, according to Wallis, middle class people may join sects.

Marginality = Wallis believes that this is a reason why people join sects, because they are isolated from society (usually refers to the lower social classes, black ghetto-dwellers etc.)

New Age Movements (NAMs) = a rather amorphous term describing a broad movement comprising of a range of different beliefs such as dowsing, paganism, healing, ecology, spirituality and including Feng Shui, crystals etc. Many of these radical beliefs emerged in the 1980s and 1990s, some of which have now gone more mainstream. There is an emphasis on individual choice and they appear to be a feature of a pick 'n' mix, postmodern society. Some of these beliefs are on the fringes of being classified a religion, though clearly many deal with a non-empirical, spiritual and supernatural realm. Other Concepts

Fundamentalism = It is often associated with extremism but it is a movement that challenges progress and refers its adherents back to the original scriptures as Holy Writ. The beliefs therefore come across as deviant in mainstream society.

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