

Revision Notes

Syllabus Section: Religion

Syllabus Area: Introduction to Religion

Issue: Definitions and Concepts..

Introduction

In this part of the course we are going to examine one of the more interesting and controversial aspects of social life (religious practice and belief). In this respect we will be examining a number of aspects of religious activity from both a cultural and historical perspective. Before we begin our examination of various aspects of religion, it will be useful to outline the basic syllabus themes that are going to be covered in this series of Study Notes.

1. Definitions and basic concepts:

In this first set of Study Notes we are going to focus upon the various ways that religion can be defined in order to establish a basic common framework for the analyses that follow in other Study Notes. In particular, we will focus here upon two major areas of sociological investigation, namely:

- a. What is religion (how can we define it) and
- b. What does religion do for both the individual and society?

This basic material will be complimented by a brief examination of the differences and similarities between religious ideologies and other forms of ideology in society

2. Perspectives on Religion.

These Study Notes will focus our attention on sociological theories of religion from Functionalist, Conflict and Interactionist perspectives.

3. Forms of Religious Organization.

These Study Notes will start to focus our attention upon the various ways that religious activity is society organized. In particular, we will look at four basic organizational types:

- Church
- Denomination
- Sect and
- Cult.

In this respect we will analyse the basic differences between these types as well as looking at such things as their different organizational structures, objectives, membership and so forth.

4. The Secularization Thesis.

Following from the above we will examine the validity of thesis that, in general terms, argues that religion is gradually losing its appeal and influence in modern industrial societies. In addition, we will develop ideas concerning possible historical changes to the nature of religious practice and belief across a number of different societies.

5. Religion as a force for social stability and change.

These Study Notes combine some of the themes that will be developed in earlier Study Notes - in particular Functionalist, Marxist and Interactionist perspectives on religion. We will examine and develop the basic question of whether or not sociologists see it as possible for religious ideas to influence major changes in social organization.

6. Religion and Society.

In the final set of Study Notes we will be examining two main themes, namely:

- a. The concept of religious pluralism (in particular an examination of multicultural societies and the relationship between different religions within these societies) and
- b. The relationship between religious activity and social position (with the focus upon concepts of class, gender and ethnicity).

As I've suggested in the above, the first thing we need to concentrate upon in this opening set of Notes is the construction of some sort of "working definition" of the concept of religion. This is important because the definition we are able to construct will specify the things that will be considered as a proper religion.

At first sight, this should be relatively simple, given we are all aware of religious beliefs in our society. We have all, for example, been born into a society in which religion exists and we have all consequently been exposed, to varying degrees of intensity, to religious practices and beliefs. In this respect, we all have opinions about "what religion is" and our stock of received cultural knowledge (which we sometimes like to call common sense) directs us towards some notion about what is involved (whenever we hear the powerful keyword "religion", for example, some picture of religious activity forms in our minds).

As sociology students, however, you should all be aware that what passes for common knowledge and the way in which, academically, we need to examine various social concepts is frequently very different. Keeping this in mind and before I offer some definitions of the concept, you might like to try the following exercise.

1. Outline your definition of the concept of religion.

A number of sociological definitions of religion can be found amongst a wide variety of different writers. A flavour of the similarities and differences between such writers is given in the following extracts:

a. McNeil ("Culture", 1986):

"Religion involves beliefs that explain experiences by claiming that there is a superhuman or supernatural agency of some kind, often a god or gods. It also involves rituals to express these beliefs in public and private ceremonies of worship. It provides a moral code to guide our everyday behaviour."

b. Bilton et al ("Introductory Sociology", 1990).

"Religion may be said to be a system of beliefs about the individual's place in the world, providing an order to that world and a reason for existence within it. However, we cannot merely define religion as a system of belief(s) that guides social action since...this is also true of magic and science. One must go further and suggest that the beliefs are supported by a community which we call a "church". Moreover, a defining feature of religious belief has been said to be its concern to venerate "the sacred" or "the holy".

c. Radcliffe-Brown ("Structure and Function in Primitive Society", 1952).

"Religion can be defined as an expression in one form or another of a sense of dependence on a power outside ourselves, a power of which we may speak as a spiritual or moral power".

d. Giddens ("Sociology", 1989).

"Religions involve a set of symbols, invoking feelings of reverence or awe and are linked to rituals or ceremonies (such as church services) practised by a community of believers...Whether or not the beliefs in a religion involve gods, there are virtually always beings or objects inspiring attitudes of awe or wonder...all religions involve ceremonials practised collectively by believers which normally occur in special places - churches, temples or ceremonial grounds. The existence of collective ceremonial is usually regarded by sociologists as one of the main factors distinguishing religion from magic..."

If we think about each of the above, it's evident that religion involves the following:

1. A system of beliefs - an "ideological framework" (or paradigm) - that explains both the nature of the world (both physical and social) and the individual's relationship to those worlds.
2. The particular form of belief structure that defines religious beliefs as different to magical belief structures or scientific belief structures is one that involves some form of collective organization for the communal expression of those beliefs.
3. Religious beliefs / systems require social mechanisms for the organization of communal religious activity - churches, temples, sacred monuments, etc. Religious activity, therefore, involves:

Communal activity

The reinforcement of religious norms and values through collective ceremonial activity.

4. A religious belief system (unlike scientific belief systems) venerates the "sacred". That is, they involve a commitment to the belief that a "higher", superhuman or supernatural, power exists over and above the abilities of human beings. This power is normally personified in terms of a "god" or "gods", but may also be expressed simply in terms of abstract "supernatural powers".

- The world of the Dugum Dani of New Guinea was organized around supernatural beings called "mogat" - the ghosts of the dead.
- The world of the Teton Sioux in America was controlled by the "Waken" powers.

5. Religious activity involves a process of socialization and social control, insofar as it involves an ethical code of conduct (for example, the "Ten Commandments" of Christianity). The adoption of such a moral code (sometimes expressed as a set of direct commands from "god") is both a characteristic of religious organization and a means of integrating the individual into the religious community and, most importantly, the worship / veneration of an abstract, unrevealed, power. It will also involve some form of collective and individual system of worship.

6. Religious activity is symbolic, insofar as it involves both sacred symbols and, most importantly, the worship or veneration of an abstract, unrevealed, power. It will also involve some form of collective and individual system of worship.

In the above we have identified two separate - but inter-related - strands to the concept of religion.

- a. Firstly, a strand that emphasises the idea that religions involve some form of developed, organized, belief systems. This strand looks at religion in ideological terms and focuses upon the general (or universalistic) characteristics of a belief system
- b. Secondly, a strand that emphasises the more specific (or particularistic) features of religious ideologies as opposed to other forms of ideology (magical, scientific, political, economic and so forth). This strand tends to emphasise the concept of the supernatural as being an integral part of religious beliefs.

In a moment we will look in more detail at the implications of this theoretical separation of the universal from the particular (in the third section of these Notes), but for now it might be useful to focus briefly upon the idea of religion as a particular form of ideology. In this respect, we need to differentiate between different types of religions belief, since it is evident that the practice of these beliefs has differed both historically and across different cultures.

Religion, (as an organized system of beliefs that focuses upon the relationship between human beings and superhuman beings or forces), has taken many forms across different societies. This involves not just differences between religious forms of belief (Christianity, Hinduism, Judaism and so forth) but also differences within religions (the Catholic and Protestant forms of Christianity, for example). In addition, religious expression - in terms of the way in which it is socially / collectively organized - also has many forms. In a later Study Pack we will look at some of these different forms by exploring the concepts of church, denomination, sect and cult, but for now it might be useful to simply look at the broad ways in which the concept of religion has been interpreted throughout human history and culture.

Giddens ("Sociology", 1989) provides us with a brief outline of some of these differences in the following terms.

1. Not all religions are monotheistic. That is, not all focus upon the belief in a single god. Some religions are polytheistic - they involve the worship of many gods.
2. Although many religions do provide their followers with moral codes of behaviour, not all are overtly concerned with moral prescriptions about behaviour (although, as a rough guide it could be argued that religious belief, by its very nature, must involve some form of prescriptive beliefs about morality and behaviour).

The Greek and Roman gods of mythology, for example, do not seem to have taken much interest in humanity, although some form of worship - and hence moral prescription about behaviour - was demanded by these gods.

3. Some religions have "creation myths" (that is an explanation of how the world came into being), but this is not true of all types of religion.
4. Different religions tend to have slightly different interpretations of what happens to the human body and spirit after death. Some, such as Christianity, involve a belief in an "afterlife" (heaven), whilst others, such as Hinduism, focus upon the idea of reincarnation (although this does, eventually, involve some concept of an afterlife)
5. Some forms of religion do not focus their attention upon a superhuman god or gods at all. Religious groups such as Scientology or Transcendental Meditation emphasise the idea that we are all born with the capacity to be spiritual beings - a capacity that needs to be explored and released through a period of "training". In this respect, it could be argued that for such religious groups every human being has the capacity to achieve a form of divinity...

Belief Systems.

In this section I want to pick-up on an earlier point that was mentioned and direct your attention to a couple of important ideas:

- a. Firstly, the idea that we can identify and group related beliefs about the nature of the social world into ideologies (or belief systems) and
- b. Secondly, that the social world in which we live is invariably characterised by the existence of a number of complementary and competitive belief systems - ideologies that claim to be able to explain the nature and basis of the social and / or natural world.

Sociologists, whatever their particular perspective (or theoretical belief system if you prefer), tend to agree that social life consists of people acting in accordance with their beliefs about the nature of that world (where disagreement tends to rapidly enter the equation is over the source and production of those beliefs - something that does not concern us for the moment).

In everyday life, the beliefs that help us sustain the appearance of order and normality are generally considered to be fairly mundane, in the sense that our social interaction on the basis of our beliefs tends to deal predominantly with the everyday, common-or-garden details of life.

You could, if you wish, explore some of these social devices (conventions) for the maintenance of what we like to believe are normal patterns of social interaction by thinking about the kinds of things that you do and say in order to maintain an orderly set of relations in your life.

2. Make a list of the topics of conversation that arise on any one day between you and a group of your friends.

Note: This will not be particularly easy, since it represents a form of covert participant observation - you are observing the behaviour of others without allowing them to know you are recording their behaviour. You will have, for example, to find some way of recording your information as soon - and as secretly - as possible after your observation has taken place.

One of things you will find if you do this exercise (or even if you simply think about the various topics of conversation that you have with your friends) is that you help each other to sustain a certain set of beliefs about the nature of something (be it men, women, Manchester United, the latest pop sensation or whatever). Through your everyday interaction you help to construct and maintain a very general belief system that becomes a kind of taken-for-granted view about the nature of the social world and social life.

If we develop the above in relation to belief systems, the main idea here is to think in terms of the way in which various beliefs are related to one another in such a way as to form a kind of institutionalised whole. That is, a system of shared, stable, beliefs that both persist over time and, most importantly, claim to explain some (or even all) aspects of the social world. When we start to think in terms of ideologies, therefore, we are making a big step away from talking about simple beliefs.

To help us understand the idea of a belief system we can use three criteria developed by Polyani ("Personal Knowledge", 1958). For Polyani, the basic features of any belief system work together to ensure that the system is maintained and these features are as follows:

1. The circularity of ideas:

Polyani argues that each idea in a belief system is explained by relating it to another idea. The validity of each idea cannot be doubted precisely because each supports the other. This is a "circularity of ideas" because one idea justifies another, which in turn is justified by reference to the former idea. In simple terms, using a religious argument, we could illustrate this by arguing:

- a. We know that God created the world because of its incredible complexity and precision.
- b. The complexity and precision of the natural world is evidence of the existence of a "higher power" (God).

2. All belief systems have in reserve a set of "subsidiary explanations for difficult situations":

By this Polyani means that when something doesn't go according to plan or as predicted, a belief system is able to adapt to this by coming up with a plausible explanation for this failure. Examples here might include:

- a. A magical love potion that doesn't work. This failure could be explained, by the magician, in terms of a failure to mix ingredients correctly.
- b. In religious terms, a prayer for rain that doesn't produce the required results could be explained by "the gods" being displeased at the behaviour of their followers. Failure is a temporary punishment for such things as a lack of faith and so forth.
- c. In scientific terms, an experiment that throws-up results that differ from those previously gained using the same experiment can be explained by such things as a failure on the part of the scientist to follow the correct procedures or some unknown variable that has somehow intruded into the experiment.

Each of these examples illustrates Polyani's point in that the "blame for failure" falls upon the individual rather than the object of their belief (magic, God, the scientific method and so forth). In this respect, by placing the blame on the individual practitioner, the belief system itself remains fundamentally intact.

In this respect, the basic point to note here is that belief systems have to be very flexible in order to ensure that their central or core beliefs are not invalidated when

something happens that seems to cast doubt on the ability of the belief system to function as it is claimed to function.

3. Belief systems reject alternative explanations of the world:

Polyani argues that in order to maintain a particular belief system, its practitioners are forced to question the validity of other belief systems. Thus, religious belief systems are able to survive questioning by scientific belief systems by casting doubt on the ability of science to explain the supernatural world. Scientific belief systems, on the other hand, question the validity of religion by arguing that it is based upon "simple faith" rather than hard questioning and evidence.

In addition, this "rejection of the alternate" also serves to inhibit conflict within a belief system by:

- a. Casting any dissenter in the role of deviant.
- b. Creating a general taken-for-granted view of the world.

The following reading from Boronski ("Knowledge", 1987) provides an interesting example of the above ideas.

3. How might laws relating to blasphemy help to support a religious belief system?

If you think about the above, our society involves a number of competing ideologies that seek to explain the nature of the social and natural worlds and what we need to do, therefore, is briefly show how each of the major ideological forms differs. It is important to note here that we are not concerned, sociologically, with an attempt to make judgements about the "truth or falsity" of competing ideologies. Rather what we are concerned with is an examination of their basic or fundamental features. The three forms we are going to examine are magical, religious and scientific belief systems.

Our examination of religious belief systems will be carried-out in the next series of Study Packs when we look at various sociological perspectives on religion. Scientific belief systems will also be considered at a later point, although a more thorough analysis of science can be found in the Theory and Methods Study Pack "What Is Science?". It might be useful to look at this Study Pack if you do not already have a reasonably clear idea about what is meant by the concept of science, although this is not absolutely necessary for an understanding of this section of the syllabus. A brief overview of magical belief systems is given below...

Magical Belief Systems

As I have suggested, religious belief systems can be differentiated from both magical and scientific systems of belief (the latter will be discussed in greater detail at a later point in the course) in terms of the ways in which knowledge is organized and beliefs expressed. Magic, as a system of belief, tends to be associated with potions, special chants, witchcraft and the like and we further tend to see it as confined to the past, "primitive" societies or "crackpots" in our own society. Whether or not this is true, it is evident that magical belief systems are significantly different from either religious or scientific systems, in the following ways:

1. Magic tends to be an individual pursuit (whereas religion is rather more collective in its social basis).
2. It involves the attempt to manipulate events in favour of the magician (or their client). This clearly differs from science where the objective is to lay down the conditions under which something will or will not occur. It also differs from religion in that whereas magic offers the certainty of being able to influence the natural world, religion merely offers the possibility (through prayer, for example).

As should be evident, the distinction between magic and religion is not always, in practice, a very clear one (individuals, for example, may well pray for a specific outcome in their life). Indeed, in pre-modern societies there is often a degree of overlap between magic and religion that is not always apparent in modern societies. However, it is evident that there is a difference between the two, if only in relation to the fact that religious belief systems have outlived their magical relations.

4. Suggest and explanation for the observation that religious belief systems have outlived magical belief systems.

One obvious reason for the decline in magic is the growth of science. As I have suggested, a potential weakness in the magical belief system is that by attempting to influence the world directly, magic exposes itself to empirical testing. Religious belief systems avoid this potential trap for the simple reason that they do not promise a particular outcome in relation to faith.

Peter Berger ("The Social Reality of Religion", 1973) uses the concept of plausibility to explain how belief systems are supported by reference to the social context within which they arise. When the "plausibility structure" of a belief system is destroyed or undermined, the belief system itself is apt to collapse or undergo radical change. We have seen an example of this in relation to religion (see the reading from Boronski above) and we can see an example of this concept in relation to magic in the following extract from Haralambos ("Themes and Perspectives", 1995).

Although I have suggested that magical belief systems have tended to fade away in modern societies, this is not altogether true. Magical rites and experiences, for example, feature in both some forms of religious practice and, most significantly, in our modern-day, "rational", society.

5. Can you think of any modern-day practices that appear to make reference to magic? For example: "Touching wood".

In addition, it is evident that magical systems such as witchcraft are still practiced by some in modern societies. If we were so inclined, we could broaden the definition of "magic" to include things like astrology, spiritualism and various forms of parapsychology, all of which are in evidence in modern societies.

It is possible to argue that magical forms of practice occur in our society in less obvious forms. In this respect, it is evident that in those instances where our desires for precision, accuracy and exactitude cannot be fulfilled by modern, empirical, science, a form of "scientific magic" arises to fill the void between what we want to achieve and the ability of science to achieve it for us. The idea here is that the magical basis of various practices is dressed-up in the clothing of science (in the sense that it is claimed to involve a way of predicting someone's behaviour or character by the ability to an absolute truth that is normally hidden to the uninitiated).

For example, in modern companies, the inability to recruit the right person for a job may have serious consequences in terms of time, money and so forth. Personnel departments, therefore, come under pressure to ensure that the person they appoint will fill a position satisfactorily. Whilst interviews, qualifications and so forth play a part, they are only rough guides to suitability - what is required is a sure-fire way of ensuring that mistakes do not occur. Various forms of "intelligence" and "personality" tests can be employed, of course, but they all suffer from the drawback that the techniques for succeeding in such tests can be learnt over time. What is needed, therefore, is some form of "scientific" measurement that reveals the "true personality" of the applicant - something that operates at the level of the unconscious mind and which, therefore, cannot be faked or learnt...

Graphology: Modern Magic?

One way of ensuring that the applicant was suitable would be to use some type of magical formula - a chant or potion perhaps - but this would hardly be in tune with the image of a modern, go-head, company (an advertisement for a Personnel Director who "must have knowledge of magical rites" just doesn't seem to ring true). The problem, therefore, is one of how to ensure precision by using some form of "scientific" method...

As I have suggested, modern science has not been able to devise any form of practice that will meet such requirements (even supposing that it was possible to predict a person's personality...). But, the requirements of the situation demand that some form of "objective" testing of personality (that supposedly works at the level of the unconscious mind) is necessary - and into this gaping void steps the "science" of graphology - the ability to reveal someone's personality through their handwriting

Graphology, it needs to be noted, has no truly scientific basis. Every time the claims of graphologists have been tested scientifically, the results - in terms of the ability to predict such intangibles as "personality" or "behaviour" - have been shown to be no better than chance. In this respect, a personnel officer could justifiably choose between the merits of two different applicants by flipping a coin and expect to achieve the same level of accuracy as a graphologist. However, the main point of this argument is that whilst graphology offers the appearance of science and objectivity, flipping a coin does not...

In this respect, graphology is a form of "scientific magic", insofar as it appears to offer a basis of personality testing that is both rigorous and valid, whilst actually having no scientific validity at all. The "magical" aspect of graphology lies in the fact that the people who employ graphologists want to believe that it is scientific - that it offers a reliable means of testing and prediction and, as we have seen in other spheres of social life, an ideological belief is powerful in terms of such things as self-fulfilling prophecies and so forth.

6. Can you identify other examples of "scientific magic" in our society?

In the final section of this Study Pack we are going to look in slightly more detail at the way in which sociologists have developed broad definitions of religion, since this will help us to understand sociological approaches to the study of religious activity.

Inclusive and Exclusive Definitions of Religion.

You will recall that at the beginning of this Study Pack a number of sociological definitions of religion were provided. In addition, I suggested that we could look at religious activity in two main ways:

- a. As an organized system of belief (a universalistic approach) and
- b. In terms of the idea that religion addresses conceptions of both the natural and supernatural world (a particularistic approach).

Bearing this in mind, sociological definitions of religion have, historically and theoretically, taken two basic forms, namely inclusive and exclusive. We need to look briefly at these definitional forms in order to understand their implications for the way in which sociological theories of religion have been produced.

1. Inclusive definitions:

As the term suggests, sociologists who use this idea tend to include any belief system (or ideology) as part of their definition of religion. This constitutes the broadest possible definition of religion and would include not just the areas that we conventionally think of as being religious, but also many belief systems that we would not, in our everyday use of the term, consider as religions.

For example, various forms of Communism (Marxism, Maoism and so forth) would be considered as forms of religion because they involve an element of faith. Science too might be encompassed by this type of definition because it too involves an element of faith (in the sense of seeing the natural world as being governed by particular laws).

The Interactionist sociologist Thomas Luckmann ("The Invisible Religion", 1967), for example, argues that any system of beliefs that tries to explain the nature of the social and natural world as a form of religion. Luckmann's sometime collaborator Peter Berger ("The Sociology of Religion", 1969) also employs a broadly inclusive definition of religion, but unlike Luckmann he argues that we should not include modern science as part of the definition on the basis that, as yet perhaps, science has not addressed itself to the same kinds of basic questions as those that are firmly addressed by religions (the meaning of life, what happens after death and so forth).

Amongst Functionalist sociologists such as Durkheim and, to a certain extent, Parsons there is also a general tendency to use an inclusive definition of religion. For these sociologists, the main concern is to analyse the function of institutionalised belief systems in terms of the way in which they help to cement moral values and support the general social order in any society. In this respect, any institution that helps to do this is effectively considered to be a religion. This would, as Peter Berger notes, include things like Marxism, Nationalism, Feminism as religions, just as Christianity or Judaism are considered religions.

Two further points can be added to the above.

1. Firstly, the definition of a religion for those who argue from an inclusivist perspective is fairly broad and arbitrary (that is, there is no clear definition of the essential defining characteristics of a religion. It may or may not, for example, include reference to supernatural phenomena). The technical term for this idea is a nominal conception of religion.
2. Secondly, those who subscribe to an inclusivist definition tend also to see the role of cultural belief systems in terms of the type of functions they perform in society. This can include the idea of religion being functional for society as a whole (Functionalist sociologists such as Durkheim and Parsons subscribe to this view, as do Interactionists such as Berger and Luckmann).

2. Exclusive definitions:

As the term suggests, sociologists who use this idea tend to use a much narrower definition of religion. In this respect such sociologists tend to be closer to what we would understand as everyday definition of religion and refers to a much more selective range of belief systems (it would exclude political philosophies such as Communism and Fascism, for example).

This definition tends to be used by Conflict sociologists such as Marx (who looked at religion in terms of the specific ways it helped to support the general belief structure of Capitalist society) and Max Weber who tended to concentrate upon the more individual aspects of religious belief, experience and activity.

A final point to note here is that for those who employ an exclusivist conception of religion the major defining characteristic of a religion is the belief in some form of supernatural being existing over and above the individual. This is sometimes called a substantive conception of religion.

In the following Study Pack we will explore a number of the main themes that have been outlined in this section. In particular, when considering the main theoretical perspectives of Functionalism, Conflict Theory and Interactionism (and their associated theories of religion) we will necessarily refer to definitions of religion, since it is clear that the way in which a sociologist defines a particular object of study will inevitably affect the kind of theory that is developed in order to explain it.

7. Briefly outline how an exclusive definition of religion might lead the sociologist to produce different theories of religion to those produced by a sociologist employing an inclusive definition.