

Revision Notes

Syllabus Section: Religion

Syllabus Area: The multicultural nature of society and the role of different religions.

Issue: Religious Pluralism

Introduction

These Notes have been designed to provide you with a knowledge and understanding of the following syllabus area:

"Recognize the multicultural nature of society and the role of different religions within it".

The **Aims** of these Notes are to allow you understand:

1. The nature and significance of religious pluralism.
2. Different forms of religious belief.

The **Objectives** of these Notes are to allow you understand:

1. Whether or not religious pluralism is indicative of the decline or vitality of religion.
2. Contemporary trends in religious pluralism.
3. The concept of millenarian religious movements.
4. The multi-cultural nature of religion in modern Britain.
5. Differences in the belief systems of major world religions.

Introduction

In the earlier sections of this part of the course I touched briefly upon the idea that, in societies such as modern Britain, religious activity is characterized by a multiplicity of religious beliefs and organizations. In short, we live in a multi-cultural society and it is evident that this has tended to result in the co-existence of a number of different religions and religious forms of behaviour.

In this section of the course I want, therefore, to develop this idea of religious pluralism in a bit more depth and to focus, in particular, upon the implications this has for the role of religion both within society as a whole and, most importantly, within different cultural groupings.

Using modern Britain as an example:

a. How many different types of religion can you identify?

b. How many different types of religious groupings can you identify within any of the above religions? For example: Christianity: Protestant (Anglican, Methodist, Baptist) and Catholic

Within Sociology, the debate about religious pluralism has tended to centre around the secularisation debate, insofar as it has tended to involve the question as to whether or not "religious pluralism" represents:

1. A decline in religious belief

See, for example, Wilson ("Contemporary Transformations of Religion", 1976)

2. A sign of its vitality

See, for example, Glock and Bellah ("The New Religious Consciousness", 1976)

In this respect, the basic dichotomy noted above stems, in part, from the argument put forward by writers such as Berger ("The Social Reality of Religion", 1983) that modern religions, having lost their monolithic character (and their monopoly of knowledge) are increasingly open to internal competition.

The Established Church in Britain, for example, can no-longer assume a monopoly of religious knowledge as its secular influence declines in the face of competing ideological frameworks - leaving it open not just to secular challenges (from scientific paradigms), but also religious challenges (from sects and cults - the New Religious Movements).

In the previous Notes ("Secularisation") we looked at this debate ("decline" versus "vitality") and it might be useful to see if you can make a few notes about each, on the basis of the work you have done thus far:

What evidence might you put forward to support the idea that:

a. Religion is in decline in Britain?

For example: Falling Church attendances.

b. Religion is not in decline?

For example: The relative growth in the number of religious sects.

Although I don't propose to go over old ground in this Study Pack, we can look at the implications that the concept of religious pluralism has for religion generally in terms of the "decline" or "vitality" dichotomy.

Decline...

One of the main proponents of the "religious pluralism as evidence of religious decline" argument is Bryan Wilson ("Contemporary Transformations of Religion", 1976). In this respect, Wilson argues that pluralism is a sign of secularisation - the progressive marginalization of religion as a significant social force in modern, industrialized, societies.

The multiplicity of religious sects, for example, is taken as evidence that religion is no-longer concerned to address the "real problems" of the world:

Sects are invariably "inward-looking", exclusive in their membership and millenarian in their outlook.

In this respect, the retreat by religions from the secular world has meant a consequent decline in their power and influence.

There are perhaps two aspects to this argument that are worthy of note:

Firstly, modern religions have come under increasing ideological attack from scientific rationalism

Ways of explaining the natural and social worlds that are more plausible than religious explanations (the theory of evolution, the "big bang" theory of the creation of the Universe and so forth).

The result of such attacks is, argues Wilson, a gradual retreat into mysticism, magic and so forth on the part of religious organizations - further loosening their influence on secular affairs.

Secondly, sects in particular are seen as evidence of exploitation - the cynical manipulation of psychologically-fragile personalities who are promised the respect, status, material rewards and so forth denied to them in modern societies through "divine intervention" and adherence to the teachings of charismatic leaders. Such sects exploit the naive, the gullible, the oppressed...As Wilson sums it up:

"The new cults do not serve society. They are indeed almost irrelevant to it, since their sources of inspiration are exotic, esoteric, subjective and subterranean. Truth comes from far places, or from lower social strata, or from hitherto untapped depths of the self or the psyche. Thus, conceptions of socially-inspired self-restraint, and coordination of individuals within the wider society, on which all ongoing social systems depend, are entirely alien. Instead of restraint there is an emphasis on pleasure."

Vitality...

Other writers, as we will see, have claimed that religious pluralism, far from being evidence of decline is, in fact, evidence of the relative health of religious beliefs and organizations. In this respect, four main points can be usefully made:

1. That different religious forms of organization arise to satisfy different social needs:

Whereas, for example, in the past the relative lack of technological knowledge in society enabled religions to monopolize forms of explanation, people in modern societies may require religious organizations to satisfy "individual psychological" - rather than "collective, social" - needs. In this respect, different forms of religion arise to fulfil these changed needs.

2. Glock and Bellah ("The New Religious Consciousness", 1973) argue that people, even in modern, industrialized, societies, require,

"personal meanings and fulfilment":

In this respect, religious organizations serve the purpose of not only providing explanations about the world - they may also provide alternative forms of explanation to scientific rationalism ("faith-healing", "spiritualism" and so forth).

3. Greely ("The Resistance of religion", 1973) sees sects, in particular, as part of a "religious revival", addressing concerns untouched by established religions and modern science:

In this respect, Greely argues that a process of resacrilization (the re-establishment of the "sacred" in people's lives) may be taking place that is not necessarily incompatible with modern life.

4. Finally, as we have seen, Berger and Luckmann argue that all forms of ideology involve some element of "faith" (whether it be religious faith, political faith - communism, capitalism, and the like - scientific faith or whatever). If we accept their basically "inclusive" view of "religion" then two points are significant:

Firstly, thinking only about the narrow view of religion as a social institution, religious pluralism is seen to be indicative of the fragmentation of both social life and religious

thought / practice. In modern industrial societies people are presented with a social world that is compartmentalized into various areas (work, education, family and the like) that may have little overt connection with one another as far as the individual is concerned.

Each little "world" within which the individual moves presents a significantly different world view or "ideological framework" - the values of work, for example, may compliment or contradict the values involved in family life.

Just as social life generally is seen to lack an overall value system, religion reflects this fragmentation insofar as no one religion can claim to provide a monolithic system of meaning that encompasses all of these worlds. We could go further and say that religious sects which attempt to provide a monolithic world view do not seem to be very attractive to people in general (as opposed to relatively tiny numbers of "disaffected" individuals).

Secondly, on the other hand, thinking about religion in wider terms (purely as a form of "faith"), we might see evidence of a form of religious vitality in the persistence of various political frameworks that seek to explain the nature of social life in a monolithic way. Communism is a classic example here, although we should not overlook the power of various forms of Nationalistic ideology (something that frequently goes hand-in-glove with some form of religious ideology) as an inclusive form of religious faith - and hence vitality...

How would you summarize the above "decline" / "vitality" argument?

...Or Business As Usual?

The debate concerning religious pluralism, as I have just outlined it, involves the assumption that the diversification of religions into a multiplicity of denominations and, most significantly, sects and cults, is a relatively modern phenomenon. That is, it is assumed to be something that has occurred, in industrialized societies, over the last few decades as part of what Weber has called a modernization and rationalization process. Whether or not this is true may, however, be open to some doubt. In this respect, it is pertinent to raise the question of whether or not religious pluralism has taken - or is taking - place at all in sociological terms.

There are two dimensions to this idea that I want to briefly outline:

1. The idea of sub-cultural differentiation.
2. The relationship between religion and mass communication.

1. In relation to the first of these dimensions, it is evident that countries such as Britain and America are not culturally-homogeneous societies. A variety of ethnic sub-cultures, for example, exist in both Britain and America and these involve a variety of different religious practices and beliefs.

In this respect, in societies that have experienced mass immigration, one would expect to see a variety of different religious beliefs, given that religion plays a vital ideological role for different sub-cultural groupings.

In the main, we can see the role of religion as a cohesive social force in forging and aiding the retention and cultural transmission of group identities. The role of religion is clearly important here, since there is evidence to suggest that ethnic sub-cultural groupings do, by and large, attempt to retain the religious beliefs that were originally developed in their society of origin:

Jews, for example, have tended to maintain a belief in Judaism (although there is evidence to suggest that there is increasing pressure from "Christian-Jewish" sects in this respect)

Southern Asians also have attempted to maintain their links with Hinduism, although this form of religious belief has become increasingly difficult to maintain in a society such as Britain. One of the cornerstones of the Hindu system - the necessity of arranging marriages to ensure spiritual purity - is difficult to maintain in a society whose dominant culture stresses individual choice in the matter of marriage partner...

Another aspect to the above is the development of various forms of religious belief in response to such things as racial discrimination, economic exploitation and so forth.

The relative growth of Islamic fundamentalism, for example, has, as Giddens ("Sociology", 1989) notes:

"Its origins in the clash between Western modernity and traditional cultures..."

This aspect of religious pluralism as having roots in social changes and pressures experienced by various sections of a particular society may also help to explain the existence and persistence of millenarian religious beliefs and movements. The following reading from Giddens ("Sociology") outlines a number of the basic ideas (especially in relation to religion as a way of promoting of social change) involved in millenarian sects and cults...

2. The development of mass communication systems may play a more-significant part in the attempt to identify the significance of religious pluralism, especially if we borrow Stanley Cohen's ideas ("Folk Devils and Moral Panics", 1963) about the way in which he claims youth cultures are phenomena that are "manufactured" by the mass media.

The idea, in this respect, is that something which is relatively small-scale and localized can be amplified on a national scale by modern systems of communication into a full-blown social movement.

The basic argument here, therefore, is that sects, for example, which develop in modern, industrialized, societies that have well-developed communication systems are:

- a. More likely to reach a wide potential (and actual) audience.
- b. Be able to put their message across in a relatively sophisticated form.
- c. More likely to survive - by soliciting support and donations from a wide audience.

In this respect, the crucial factor is not just the development of a system of mass communication, but also access to that system:

A revivalist meeting held in a tent in the mid-19th century in America, for example, might have attracted the attention of 100 people.

Its modern equivalent - Televangelism - can broadcast to hundreds of thousands (millions?) of people...

The basic argument, here, is not simply that religious pluralism might not necessarily be a recent phenomenon (19th century Christianity experienced a series of schisms that gave rise to various sects, for example). Rather, it is that both the rise in mass communications and access to these channels of communication has meant that religious sects and cults have far greater opportunities, in modern, industrialized, societies, to bring themselves to the attention of both a wide audience and, most importantly, sociologists.

The question to answer, here, is two-fold:

1. Is religious pluralism a recent phenomenon - or is it simply that it appears to be of recent origin because we have greater evidence of the existence of sects in modern societies?
2. Are we justified in arguing that modern forms of religious pluralism are, in themselves, evidence of changing religious beliefs and practices?

One observation we can make, in the above respect, is the clear relationship between the growth of fundamentalist sects and the development of mass communication (especially radio and television). This relationship suggests that the growth of religious pluralism in America may be less a factor of the sudden emergence of fundamentalist sects than a factor of:

The existence of mass communications, allied to a

Constitutional freedom of religion, allied to the

Access of religious groups to such a communication system

In this sense, it is probable that fundamentalist sects existed in America (and elsewhere) prior to the development of mass communications. If this assumption is correct, it would suggest that religious pluralism was far more widespread than writers such as Wilson, Glock and Bellah have suggested - which casts some doubt upon the idea that religious pluralism is either a sign of religious decline or a sign of religious vitality...

The above should not be taken to mean that religious sects are somehow manufactured or produced by the mass media. Rather, it involves the idea that the presence of a system of mass communication in any society gives religious sects the chance to attract:

Publicity,
Membership,
Funding.

It brings such sects to the attention of the general population in ways that would have been impossible in the past, prior to such a system being in evidence. Thus, in the past, religious pluralism may have been widespread but relatively unnoticed, whilst in the present it is both widespread and noticed...

In relation to Britain, it is evident that religious sects have not had the same levels of access to mass communication systems as has occurred in America and this may account, in part, for their relative lack of existence (or it may, of course, simply be that sects in Britain are relatively small in scale and localized in both membership and geography).

Contemporary Trends...

A number of points can be made in relation to the idea of religious pluralism:

1. In many societies, religious behaviour is characterized by its multi-cultural nature.
2. Religion clearly remains significant in modern societies, for a variety of reasons. Religious beliefs, however, appear more-likely to be held and expressed on an individualized basis (in terms of such things as the meaning of life and death and so forth).
3. Overt religious pluralism has meant a relative decline in the social, institutional, influence of religion (as expressed in political terms / activity).
4. As Perry and Perry ("The Social Web", 1973) note:

"In modern society...religious organizations resemble other voluntary associations, offering practical help and promoting such values as mental health, peace of mind, family togetherness and even patriotism. Therefore, although religious activity is rather high, the supernatural, or sacred, facet of religious life is definitely declining".

5. The Established Church, in modern Britain, tends to be adapting to a changed role - one of coming to terms with its declining secular / political power. To this extent, it is coming to resemble a form of pressure group.

Government spokespeople may complain that the business of the Church is the spiritual welfare of the population, but increasingly the Church is being forced into trying to look-after the physical / mental welfare of the population - its role is changing (and being changed by) the changes in modern society.

Religion in Multi-Cultural Britain.

As we have seen, the concept of religious pluralism relates to two basic ideas:

1. Firstly, the idea that the monolithic forms of religion that are characteristic of pre-modern societies have become increasingly fragmented in modern societies.
2. Secondly, the idea that in societies where various forms of immigration and emigration have been relatively common, there arises a wide range of qualitatively different religious forms that reflect the different cultural backgrounds of their adherents (multi-cultural society). That is, we find evidence, in the same society, of not just differences of interpretation (internal diversity) within one area of religious belief (for example, the Protestant and Catholic forms of Christianity), but fundamental differences of belief (external diversity).

It is this second area to which we can now briefly turn. The first table identifies a number of different ethnic groups in Britain and the following extracts (from Bruce "Religion In Modern Britain", 1995) introduce you to some of the fundamental beliefs associated with different religions in our society.

One characteristic of the different types of ethnic cultural groupings noted above is that they tend to be markedly more religious than other sections of our society. This can be explained on the basis of a number of factors:

1. Relatively recent immigration from cultures that place greater stress on religious observance.
2. Closer family structures resulting in greater pressure to conform to dominant religious norms.
3. The social functions performed by religious practice. In a new country, for example, immigrants find familiar rituals, symbols and personal contacts through practicing religion (that is, the integrating function of religion is to the fore for such communities).
4. Through practicing a shared set of beliefs, cultural identities can be maintained. On this last point, it is interesting to note that the Protestant community in Northern Ireland shares many of the patterns of observance and association that are characteristic of immigrant groups. A good example here might be the celebration of the Battle of the Boyne 300 years ago where the Protestant William of Orange defeated the Catholic armies of James 1st (?). This, perhaps, is indicative of the way in which Northern Irish Protestants see themselves in cultural terms... In general, we can perhaps identify three main phases of cultural integration experienced by immigrant groups in Britain over the past 50 or so years.

1. An arrival phase in which communal religious observance is difficult because the required religious structures are not in place.
2. An orthodox phase in which a flowering of communal religious activity is created.
3. An assimilation phase in which orthodox practices and beliefs are exposed (especially amongst children) to wider cultural influences. These include the obvious secular and alternative religious influences, but they also tend to include a recognition of internal religious pluralism as people are exposed to different interpretations within their own religions..

The extent to which true assimilation is ever achieved (or even desirable) is a moot point. Equally, it may well be that hostility from the dominant culture may result in a strengthening of sub-cultural norms and values as a means of self-protection (both physical and ideological).

In this situation, what we may be witnessing is a redefinition and reinterpretation of cultural identities based less upon region (Indians, Pakistani, etc.) and more on a religion (Muslim, Hindu, Sikh and so forth), since for third or fourth generation immigrants born in Britain the culture and traditions of their family's original homeland may have little real meaning.

Cultural Clashes...

Looking briefly at some of the less obvious forms of culture clash that arise from religious pluralism (and leaving aside questions of racism as belonging to a different dimension to the one under discussion at present), we can see the ways in which tensions arise from either a misunderstanding or wilful ignorance of different religious traditions.

In terms of religious dress, for example, a Sikh must keep his head covered when outside (which created problems when crash-helmets were made compulsory on motor-cycles in 1972 - it took four years of disobedience before Sikh's were exempted from this law). The carrying of symbolic weapons (such as daggers) also creates problems for Sikh's.

More recently, Muslim groups have argued that the State should provide funds for the establishment of Muslim schools, where girls and boys can be educated separately according to Muslim religious principles. Although the Anglican and Roman Catholic Churches enjoys such funding, Muslim requests have, thus far, not been granted.

More generally, Hindu's have found it increasingly difficult to observe religious caste law in a secular society such as Britain. This has not only meant a general weakening of imperatives governing such things as with whom you can share a meal or a room, but it has also created more fundamental problems. One of the main imperatives of caste law is that people must marry within their caste (in effect, someone of the same social rank) - to marry someone of another caste is taboo and results in the individuals involved becoming "Untouchables" (the lowest rank in the system).

The mechanism for maintaining Caste law is the arranged marriage - something that, in Britain, has not been practiced to any great extent over the past 200 years (arranged marriages were fairly common amongst the upper classes, although not for religious reasons. It simply ensured that family wealth was not diluted by marrying into a penniless family...). It is, of course, possible to argue that the most famous arranged marriage in contemporary Britain was that between Prince Charles and Lady Diane Spencer. In modern Britain, however, it has proven difficult to maintain the arranged marriage amongst young Hindus and has been a source of some tension within and between communities...

Finally, one of the most significant sources of cultural clash is over the law of blasphemy - most famously exemplified by the case of Salman Rushdie and his book "The Satanic Verses". Rushdie has been sentenced to death in Muslim countries such as Iran and Bangladesh. In Britain, only Christians are allowed to sue for "blasphemous libel" (that is, a libel against the Christian religion) and this has been used infrequently over the past 30 or so years, mainly at the instigation of moral entrepreneurs such as Mary Whitehouse (she successfully sued Gay News over a poem that it published ("The Love That Dare Not Speak It's Name) suggesting that Jesus Christ was a homosexual. She unsuccessfully sued Howard Brenton over his play "The Romans in Britain" which, it was claimed, libelled Christianity).

Having looked, in varying levels of detail, at the idea of multi-culturalism and religious pluralism, we can now turn to look at a related area, that of the nature of changing forms of religious belief in our society.