

Chapter 9: Religion

Religion and social change

Sociological perspectives on religion

- Functionalism – an inclusive approach looking at how religion functions to create, promote and maintain the cultural values that are the moral basis for social order.
- Neo-functionalism – specific functions of religion need to be evaluated, because in some countries, the majority of the population are not particularly religious.
- Marxism – the role of religion is to promote a consensus that ultimately benefits a ruling class.
- Neo-Marxism – hegemony is used to explain the role of religion in contemporary society.
- Weberian approaches – focus on what religion means for individuals and society rather than what it does.
- Interactionism (neo-Weberian) – focuses upon the way collective beliefs function as belief systems, organising knowledge about the world.

Religion and social change

- Traditional functionalism – religion is seen as a conservative force, one that functions to promote social solidarity.
- Traditional Marxism – religion is seen as a broadly conservative force to support and promote the economic base of society.
- Neo-functionalism – under certain conditions, cultural institutions such as religion have the potential to promote change.
- Neo-Marxism – the conservative role of religion acts as a channel for social dissent that helps to preserve political and economic stability by promoting a limited, but crucial, level of change.
- Weberianism – religion is not necessarily a conservative force as religiously inspired movements have often produced dramatic social transformations.
- Stability *and* change – religion may play a contradictory role, therefore it should not be seen as *either* conservative or radical.

Religion and its links with modernity and postmodernity

- Modernity – the relationship between religion and modernity is one of challenge and a loss of power, control and influence.
- Postmodernity – there is no single definitive postmodern view of religion. There are a range of viewpoints that are difficult to group into a unified and coherent perspective.
- New age movements (NAMs) – a wave of religious enthusiasm that emerged in the 1970s.
- Fundamentalism – forms of belief and organisation that advocate a strict observance of the fundamental beliefs of a religion, providing certainty in an uncertain world.
- Globalisation – global economic and cultural processes expose people to different views and belief systems and lead to notions of moral relativism: nothing is intrinsically good and nothing wholly bad.

Religious movements

Different religious movements and their power within society: cults, sects, denominations, churches and new religious movements

- Church-type – one of the most powerful forms of religious institution, although their power and influence varies.
- Denomination – organised sub-divisions of a major religion normally beginning as a breakaway group within a church formed through schisms.
- Sects – develop around two forms of dissent, religious and social. Sects offer a solution to people and their problems by giving them something solid and lasting in which to believe.
- Cults – loose-knit groups that collect around a set of common themes, beliefs or interests. The religious experience is highly individualistic.
- New religious movements (NRMs) – can be seen as resolving the confusion surrounding the classification of sects and cults. They developed in the mid-20th century and they are substantively rather than functionally religious.

Debates about secularisation

- Religiosity – indicators used to measure how religious someone is: belief (knowing), participation (doing), commitment (feeling).
- Pro-secularisation – the claim that religion has declined in significance, at least in many parts of the developed world.
- Anti-secularisation – the belief that religious influence within modern societies is still strong.
- Shopping for religion – religions should be seen as economic organisations; in culturally diverse societies where spiritual competition is fierce, religions should be studied as businesses. They must compete for ‘customers’ in the religious marketplace if they are to survive.
- Resacrilisation – religious changes are evidence of resacrilisation; people are becoming more religious and spiritual.
- Post-secularisation – secularisation processes do not involve linear movement from ‘the religious’ to ‘the secular’, there needs to be a differentiation between religious institutions and practice, leaving individual beliefs out of the issue.

Sociological studies of the relationship between religious beliefs, organisations and social groups (including links to class, gender and ethnicity)

- Social class – it is complicated to look at the relationship between religion and class due to the difficulty in defining and measuring class in addition to measuring people’s beliefs.
- Gender – women seem to have higher levels of participation in religion and religious activities. Men may be seen as more risky in their behaviour in being less religious than women.
- Ethnicity – there are marked differences in religiosity across different nations, with emergent nations having higher levels of religious belief and practice than developed nations. In such emergent societies, there are unlikely to be ethnic differences in religiosity.
- Privatised religion – religion characterised by expression and affection in a private rather than public sphere.