Religion: Crash Course Sociology #39

Crash Course: Sociology
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Religion might not seem like something a sociologist could study. After all, religion is about personal beliefs, right? So sociology won't give you any answers about the existence of god or how many angels can dance on the head of a pin. But sociology can help you think about religion as a social institution. In the same way that we might study the family or the government, we can ask questions about religion's role in society. Like how do different religions influence social norms in a society? What's the function of religion in a society? Does it improve social cohesiveness or entrench inequalities? Before we try to answer those big questions, let's start with a simpler one. What is religion?

[intro]

To understand how sociologists think about religion, we need to go back to the work of our old friend, French sociologist Emile Durkheim. Durkheim defined religion not in terms of gods or supernatural phenomena, but in terms of the sacred: things that are set apart from society as extraordinary, inspiring awe, and deserving of reverence. He claimed that in all societies, there's a difference between the sacred and the profane, or the mundane, everyday parts of life.

Religion, then is a social institution that involves a unified system of beliefs and practices that recognizes the sacred. But this isn't a setup between good and evil. Sacred doesn't mean good and profane doesn't mean bad. Instead, recognizing something as sacred is about seeing a certain place, object, or experience as special and creating markers that separate it from your day-to-day life. It's natural then to think about religion from the perspective of symbolic interactionism, which thinks about society in terms of the symbols that humans construct. And all religions rely on the use of symbols to create the sacred.

Rituals, for example, are a form of symbolic practice that highlight faith. Many religions use certain actions during prayer that symbolize deference to god, such as Catholics making the sign of the cross before prayer, or Muslims supplicating themselves and facing Mecca, the birthplace of the prophet Mohammed.

Many religions also practice ritual ablution, or washing certain parts of the body during a religious ceremony. For example, in the religious practice of baptism, water is a symbol of people's belief that faith cleanses the soul.

Objects can also take on sacred meaning. Symbols like the cross or the star of David are considered totems, objects that we have collectively defined as sacred. Types of dress or grooming practices, such as men's beards in Islam or Orthodox Judaism, also become sacred indicators of faith because they are visible symbols of religious belief. In this way, totems confer in-group membership to those who wear or use these symbols because they provide a way for people to demonstrate their faith and recognize that faith in others.

But the role of religion in society goes beyond influencing our symbolic practices. In addition to defining the sacred and the profane, Emile Durkheim also looked at religion through the lens of structural functionalism, and he identified three major functions of religion that contribute to the operation of society.

First, religion helps establish social cohesion by uniting people around shared symbols, norms, and values. Durkheim argued that religious thought promotes norms like morality, fairness, charity, and justice. Churches act as gathering places, forming the backbone of social life for many people. In fact, membership in a church is the most common community association for Americans.

Second, Durkheim said societies use religion as a form of social control. People behave well not only out of fear of their friends and families disapproving, but also out of a desire to remain in their god's good graces. Christianity and Judaism, for example, have the Ten Commandments, a set of rules for behavior that they believe were sent directly from god. But these commandments aren't just rules about how to worship. Many of them match up with societal norms, like respecting your parents, or not committing adultery, or with secular laws, which prohibit murder and theft.

Third, in a functionalist perspective, religion provides people with a sense of purpose in life. Sometimes it can fell like our lives are such tiny blips in the grand scheme of the universe, it can seem hard to imagine why your actions matter. Religion gives people a reason to see their lives as meaningful, by framing them within the greater purpose of their god's grand plan.

But while Durkheim's framing demonstrates the many ways religions promote social unity, religion can, of course, also be a force of division. Social conflict theory perspectives understand religion in terms of how it entrenches existing inequalities. Karl Marx saw religion as an agent of social stratification, which served those in power by legitimizing the status quo and framing existing inequality as part of a divine plan.

Rulers in many societies were believed to be given their right to rule by divine right. Chinese emperors were believed to have a mandate from heaven, and were given the title "son of heaven" to indicate their divine authority to rule. In Europe, heads of state were often also the head of the church. In fact, to this day, the British monarchs are the formal heads of the Church of England. And some Christian religions, such as Calvinism, espouse predestination, or the belief that god pre-ordains everything that comes to pass, including whether you get into heaven. So by this logic, having wealth and power was seen as an indication of god's good favor. So for these reasons, Marx saw religion as a huge barrier to revolutionary change, referring to it as "the opiate of the masses." After all, it's hard to convince people to rise up against the elites if they believe that the elites have the power of god behind them.

In addition to entrenching political and economic inequalities, conflict theory perspectives also explore how religion contributes to gender and racial inequalities. Let's go to the Thought Bubble to look at how feminist theory and race conflict theory help us understand religion's effects on these kinds of inequality.

If you walk around any major museum in the Western world, you're pretty much guaranteed to find some art depicting religious figures from Judaism or Christianity. And in these paintings, god is pretty much exclusively an old white man with a beard. And in fact, divine figures and their prophets in most religions are male. Virtually all of the world's major religions are patriarchal, with religious texts often explicitly describing men in the image of god and women in subordinate roles to men. For example, in Christianity, the first man, Adam, was created in god's image, whereas the first woman, Eve, was created from Adam's rib to serve and obey Adam. Many religions also position women as immoral beings in need of male constraint. In the Bible, Eve committed the original sin by tempting Adam to eat the forbidden fruit and got both of them booted from Paradise.

Many religions ban women from the clergy, including Catholicism, Orthodox Judaism, and Islam. Religion has also been used as a way to control women's behaviors, requiring them to dress modestly or not allowing women to speak in church or be alone with men outside their family. Religion has also been used to uphold another type of social inequality, racial inequality. Slavery in the United States, for example, was framed as morally justifiable based on various texts from the Bible, most prominently the story of Cain and

Abel, in which god marked Cain for murdering his brother, which was interpreted to mean marking him as sinful with darker skin. But that's not to say that religion is always on the side of oppression.

Quakers, a sect of Christianity, were leaders in the Abolition movement and in the Women's Suffrage movement of the nineteenth century. The Civil Rights movement of the 1960s was led by many with ties to the Black religious community, most notably the Southern Christian Leaderhip Conference, a civil rights organization headed up by a Baptist minister that you might have heard of, named Martin Luther King Jr. Thanks, Thought Bubble.

So we've talked a lot so far about how religion works in theory but--how does religion work in a practical sense? Understanding how different religions are organized and how they integrate with the rest of society helps us understand which of these theories makes sense in different religious context.

We only have to look at the US to see why understanding the practical importance of religion can might be of interest to sociologists. In the United States, more than 70% of American adults claim that religion is important in their lives, which is more than double the rate of adults in high income countries like Norway or Japan. National surveys show that about 50% of American identify themselves as Protestants, 20% identify as Catholics, 6% identify with a non-Christian faith and 23% do not identify with a religion at all.

Within the Protestant faith, there are a large number of denominations, or subgroups of religious practice. Including both mainstream denominations, such as Presbytarian and Lutherans and Evangelical churches, such as Methodists and Baptists. Evangelical denominations are characterized by more active attempts to proselytize or spread the faith to others outside the faith. But who identifies as what religion depends a lot on who you are; in terms of where you live, in terms of class and in terms of race and ethnicity.

More well established religious faiths that are well-integrated into society are what sociologists call Churches. Most major religions are what we would call a Church; for example, Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Hinduism and Buddhism are all "Churches". Religious sects, meanwhile, are faiths with belief systems that are less formal and less integrated into society; and they tend to attract followers who are more disadvantaged. Some examples include Jehovah's Witnesses, Pentecostals, or Unitarians.

Not only does class matter when it comes to your religion--where you live might too. Catholicism is more common in Northeastern and Southwestern states, whereas the South has high concentrations of Evangelical Protestants such as Baptists, and the Midwest has higher concentrations of other Protestant faiths, such as Methodists and Lutherans. Many of these regional differences stem from which racial ethnic groups settled in these regions. The Midwest, for example, had high numbers of German and Scandinavian immigrants settle there and these ethnic groups are often Lutherans. Irish and Italian Americans, who were more likely to be Catholic, settled in New England and the Mid-Atlantic.

Black Americans, who are heavily concentrated in Southern states, are somewhat more likely to be religious than the US population as a whole, with 87% claiming an affiliation to some faith. And the vast majority of Black Americans identify with a Protestant faith, with evangelical churches being the most common affiliation. There's also a growing number of Black American who identify as Muslim, with about 40% of all native-born Muslims in the US identifying themselves as African American.

Overall, however, the importance of religion in the United States has been on the decline in recent decades; a process known as secularization. Younger Americans are much more likely now to report that they do not believe in any religion compared to past generations. Nonetheless, the influence of religion on society isn't going anywhere anytime soon. As we learned today, no matter which school of sociological thought you subscribe to, religion has ties to the very rules and norms that shape what our country and culture look like.

Today, we looked at how symbolic interactionism helps us understand religions dichotomy of the Sacred vs. the Profane. Then, we compared the perspectives of Structural Functionalists and Social Conflict Theorists on whether religion improves social cohesiveness or increases social stratification. And we ended with a discussion of how religious practice in the US differs across race and class lines.

[Credits]
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