

sample resources
Sociology

Introduction to the Sociology of Religion

1) What religion is not?

- 1) Religion should not be identified with monotheism (one god)
- 2) Religion should not be identified with moral prescriptions controlling the behaviour of believers.
- 3) Religion is not necessarily concerned with 'myths of creation'.
- 4) Religion cannot be identified with the supernatural.

Key: we cannot simply focus on one-sided Christian conceptions.

2) What it is?

Dictionary

'...1 belief in a superhuman controlling power, esp. in a personal God or gods entitled to obedience and worship **2** thing that one is devoted to'.

Latin religio = bond

Sociology

For Giddens (2001), religions share the following:

'Set of symbols that invoke feelings of reverence and are linked to collective rituals/ceremonies'.

- No precise definition.
- Founding fathers put forward a variety of definitions.
- Functional Definitions (FOR)
- Substantive Definitions (IS)

Functional definitions can be criticised for being too inclusive. Substantive definitions can be criticised for being too exclusive.

What is the point of having a definition? Should we have a clear definition? Would it help in debates (secularization)?

3) Varieties of Religions

- a) Traditional societies: shaman; totemism; animism (belief in spirits or ghosts)
- b) Three most influential monotheistic religions in world history are Judaism, Christianity and Islam.
- c) Hinduism is a polytheistic religion
- d) Religions of the Far East: Buddhism, Confucianism and

Taoism have no gods. They emphasise ethical ideals.

Key term: multicultural society.

4) Holiday work: 10 Definitions

Identify definitions:

1) Structure of the topic

- Definition of religion
- Varieties of religion
- Theories of religion
- Types of religious organisation
- Gender and religion
- Secularization Debate
- New Religions Movements
- Religious Fundamentalism
- Religion and post-modernism

6) Functionalist approach to religion.

a) Concepts

- b) Steps of theory
- c) Application to religion:
Durkheim; Parsons, Malinowski
- d) Criticism

A religion is a unified set of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden – beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a church – all those who adhere to them (Durkheim).

Religious distress is at the same time the expression of real distress and the protest against real distress. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, just as it is the spirit of a spiritless situation. It is the opium of the people. The abolition of religion as the illusory happiness of the people is required for their real happiness (Marx and Engels).

To define 'religion', to say what it is, is not possible at the start of a presentation such as this. Definitions can be attempted, if at all, only at the conclusion of the study. The essence of religion is not even our concern (Weber).

Religion, then, consists of beliefs, actions, and institutions, which assume the existence of supernatural entities with powers of action, or impersonal powers or processes possessed of moral purpose (Bruce).

Religion is an attempt to explain what cannot otherwise be explained; to achieve power, when all other powers have failed; to establish poise and serenity in the face of evil and suffering that other efforts have failed to eliminate (Yinger).

The most established and institutionalised form of religious organisation, in that it is widely integrated into mainstream culture, and generally supportive of the state acting as a conservative force.

Smaller, more radical protest movements set up in opposition to a dominant mainstream religion and generally critical of the state.

'Cooled down sect', organisations that lie between a church and a sect, with a tendency towards conservatism, but may not be supportive of the state. Similar to church as being an institutionalised religious organisation.

The process whereby, especially in modern industrial societies, religious beliefs, practices, and institutions lose social significance. The extent of this process can be measured in many different ways.

The religious justification for the liberation of oppressed groups.

A belief in returning to the literal meanings of scriptural texts.

The decline of the sacred and supernatural in favour of scientific explanations.

Dedicated to a god, connected with religion, safeguarded or required by tradition. That which inspires attitudes of awe or reverence among believers in a given set of religious ideas.

Shared ideas or beliefs that serve to justify the interests of dominant groups.

Sacred, fundamentalism, ideology, Liberation Theology, denomination, sect, church, secularisation, desacrilisation