15.1 The Sociological Approach in Religion

Why do sociologists study religion? Because it is ubiquitous! For example, over centuries, someone has sought to understand and explain the “meaning of life.” To understand a belief, sociologists must study its religion. Religion is a system of beliefs, values, and meanings concerning what a person holds sacred or considers to be spiritually significant. While some people think of religion as something supernatural because religious beliefs can be highly personal, religion is also a social institution. In our study of religion we will use “disinterested scholarship” in other words, not to determine what is right or wrong, true or false, but rather how does religion function and affect society.

The History of Religion as a Sociological Concept

Religion, in one way or another, has been found in all human societies since societies first appeared. Some form of religion is found in every known society today. Religious experience refers to the conviction a person has that we are connected to “the transcendent.” Religious beliefs are specific ideas members of a particular group hold to be true. Religious rituals are behaviors or practices that are either required or optional of the members of a particular group. To Durkheim, “transcendent” meant extraordinary—something that inspired wonder and that seemed connected to the transcendent. He used the word “profane” to describe everyday things in life. Durkheim is generally considered the first sociologist who analyzed religion in terms of its societal impact. Above all, he believed religion is about social cohesion. It binds people together (social cohesion), promotes consistency (social control), and offers strength during life’s inconsistencies and tragedies (meaning and purpose). A different view, German sociologist and political economist Max Weber saw religion mostly as a precipitator of social change. He authored a book called The Protestant Work Ethic... wherein the protestant ethics of having faith and good works moves society forward. Sociologists almost universally agree in the centrality of religion to society.

Theoretical Perspectives on Religion

Functionalism advocates that religion serves several functions in society, like providing answers to spiritual questions or mysteries, offering comfort, and creating a place for social interaction and social control. It helps answer questions like, “How was the world created?” “Why do we suffer?” “Is there a plan for our lives?” and “Is there an afterlife?” One of the most important functions of religion, from a functionalist perspective, is the opportunities it creates for social interaction and the formation of groups.

Conflict Theory views religion as an institution that helps maintain inequalities of social inequality. Conflict theorists are critical of the way some religions use the idea that believers should be satisfied with existing circumstances because they are divinely ordained. Karl Marx’ famous statement was that “religion is the opiate of the masses.” The rich (the Bourgeoisie) use religion to keep poor people (the Proletariat), poor and teaches them that they shouldn’t be concerned with what they believe because their “true” reward will come after death. The feminist perspective is a conflict theory view that focuses specifically on gender inequality.

Symbolic Interactionism studies the interactions of everyday life. To interactionists, beliefs and experiences are not sacred unless individuals in a society see or regard them as sacred. Interactionists are interested in what religious symbols communicate. What are some religious symbols and what do they communicate? Does the same symbol mean the same thing to all who see it?

15.2 World Religions

Types of Religious Organizations

Most religions transform through different organizational phases. For example, Christianity began as a cult, transformed into a sect, and today exists as an
eclesia in some countries. Cults, like ________, are new religious groups. The term cult is sometimes used interchangeably with the term new religious movement (NRM). What are some ________ that are typically seen as cults today? A sect is a small and relatively ________ group. Most of the well-known Christian ________ in the United States today began as sects. A denomination is a large, mainstream religious organization, but it does not ________ to be official or state sponsored. The term ecclesia, ________, referring to a political assembly of citizens in ancient Athens, Greece, now refers to a religious group that most ________ members of a society belong to. It is considered a nationally recognized, or ________, religion that holds a religious monopoly and is closely allied with state and secular powers. The United States ________ have an ecclesia by this standard, but Christianity is the largest religious ________ in the U.S.

**Types of Religions**

Note that some religions may be ________—or understood—in various categories. For instance, the Christian notion of the Holy ________ (God, Jesus, Holy Spirit), to some scholars defies the definition of monotheism, which is a religion based on belief in a single deity. Hinduism is an example of a ________ religion, which is based on belief in multiple deities. Some Japanese practice ________, which practices animism, which is a belief that things like animals, plants, and objects of the natural world ________ be the dwelling place of divine spirits, while people who practice totemism believe in a divine connection between ________ and other natural beings. It is also important to note that every society also has nonbelievers, such as ________, who do not believe in a God, and ________, who hold that God is unknowable. While typically not an organized group, atheists and agnostics represent about ________% of the U.S. population in 2017.

**The World’s Religions**

**Hinduism**

Claims to be the ________ religion in the world today, originated in the Indus River Valley about 4,500 years ago in what is now modern-day northwest ________ and Pakistan. With roughly one billion followers, Hinduism is the ________ largest of the world’s religions. Hindus believe in a divine power that can manifest as different ________. Three main incarnations—Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva are the most prominent. Hindus generally believe in a set of principles called ________, which refer to one’s duty in the world that corresponds with “right” actions. Hindus also believe in ________, or the notion that spiritual ramifications of one’s actions are balanced cyclically in this life or a future life (__________).

**Buddhism**

was founded by ________ Gautama around 500 B.C.E. Siddhartha was said to have given up a comfortable, upper-class life to follow one of ________ and spiritual devotion. Buddha’s teachings encourage Buddhists to lead a ________ life by accepting the four Noble Truths: 1) life is ________, 2) suffering arises from attachment to desires, 3) suffering ________ when attachment to desires ceases, and 4) freedom from suffering is possible by ________ the “middle way.” Buddhists fall under the category of ________ religions—Buddha is not a god and there is no other identified god in Buddhism.

**Confucianism**

The religion was developed by Kung Fu-Tzu (Confucius), who lived in the sixth and fifth centuries _________. An extraordinary teacher, his lessons—which were about self-discipline, respect for ________ and tradition, and jen (the ________ treatment of every person) Some religious scholars consider Confucianism more of a ________ system than a religion because it focuses on sharing wisdom about moral practices but doesn’t involve any type of specific ________; nor does it have formal objects.

**Taoism**

In Taoism, the purpose of life is ________ peace and harmony. Tao is usually translated as “way” or “______.” The central concept of tao can be understood to describe a spiritual reality, the order of the universe, or the way of ________ life in harmony with the former two. The yin-yang symbol and the concept of polar forces are central Taoist ________ whereas Confucianism is concerned with day-to-day rules of conduct, Taoism is concerned with a more spiritual level of being.”
Judaism Jews are __________, worshipping only one God. The Jews’ covenant, or promise of a special relationship with Yahweh (God), is an important __________ of Judaism, and their sacred text is the Torah, which __________ also follow as the first five books of the Bible. __________ refers to a collection of sacred Jewish oral interpretations of the Torah.

Islam is a monotheistic religion and it follows the __________ given through the prophet Muhammad, born in __________, Saudi Arabia, in 570 C.E. Muhammad is seen as a __________, not as a divine being, but he is believed to be the messenger of __________ (God), who is divine. The followers of Islam, are called __________. Islam means “peace” and “submission.” The sacred text for Muslims is the Qur’an (or Koran). __________ Muslims are guided by five “pillars”: 1) There is no God but __________ and Muhammad is his prophet, 2) prayer __________ times a day, 3) Alms for the poor, 4) fasting during the month of __________, and 5) a Haj, or pilgrimage to the holy center of __________.

Christianity Today the __________ religion in the world, began 2,000 years ago in Palestine, with Jesus of Nazareth. The sacred __________ for Christians is the Bible. While Jews, Christians, and Muslims share many of same historical religious __________, their beliefs verge. Christians believe that he __________ appeared in the person of Jesus Christ, Jews and Muslims disagree. While they recognize __________ as an important historical figure, their traditions don’t believe he’s the __________ of God, and their faiths see the prophecy of the messiah’s arrival as __________ yet fulfilled. Different Christian groups have variations among their sacred texts. For instance, Mormons, an established Christian sect, also use the __________, the Catholic Bible includes the Apocrypha, a collection that, while part of the 1611 King __________ translation, is no longer included in __________ versions of the Bible. Although monotheistic, Christians often describe their __________ through three manifestations that they call the __________ Trinity: the father (God), the Son (Jesus), and the Holy Spirit.

15.3 Religion in the United States the complexity of religious __________ in our society.

Religion and Social Change Religion has historically been an impetus to social __________. The United States' first European arrivals were acting largely on religious __________.

Liberation Theology began as a __________ within the Roman Catholic Church in the 1950s and 1960s in Latin America, and it combines Christian principles with __________ activism. It uses the church to promote social change via the political arena, today liberation theology is an __________ movement that encompasses many churches and denominations. Liberation theologians discuss theology from the point of view of the __________ and the oppressed, in Europe and North America, __________ theology has emerged from liberation theology as a movement to bring social justice to women.

Megachurches A __________ is a Christian church that has a very large congregation averaging more than __________ people who attend regular weekly services. As of 2009, the largest megachurch in the United States was in __________ Texas, with an average weekly attendance of more than 43,000 people. Megachurches exist in other parts of the world, especially in South Korea, __________, and several African countries, but the rise of the megachurch in the U.S. is a fairly __________ phenomenon that has developed primarily in California, Florida, __________, and Texas. Critics of megachurches believe they are too large to promote __________ relationships among fellow church members or the pastor, as could occur in smaller houses of worship.

Secularization Historically sociologists Emile Durkheim, __________ Weber, and Karl Marx and psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud anticipated the __________ of society and claimed that modernization would bring about a __________ in the influence of religion. Conversely, some people suggest secularization is a root __________ of many social problems, such as divorce, drug use, and educational downturn. Some in the U.S. would like to see an increase in the __________ of religion and some would like to see a decrease; the core __________ tends to center on the “separation of church and
State." The _______ sentence of the First Amendment to the Constitution reads: "Congress shall make
no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the _______ exercise thereof." How
does this affect public prayer at a football game or another venue?
Compared to other democratic, industrialized countries, the United States is generally perceived to be a
fairly _______ nation. Whereas 65 percent of U.S. adults in a 2009 Gallup survey said religion
was an important part of their daily lives, the numbers were lower in Spain (______ percent), Canada
(42 percent), France (30 percent), the United Kingdom (27 percent), and _______ (17 percent).
What will the religious _______ of America look like in the future?