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Societal Aspect of Religion: Historical Perspective

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ABSTRACT

Social organization has always involved a religious dimension in various aspects of human life. This paper aims to discuss the position of religion in the society and how the practice of religion having affected the society in matters concerning cohesion, governance, cultural construction and intergroup interaction. As the object of analysis in this research is based on the general historical view on religion, and regards religion as one of the central aspects of society affecting other spheres of human life, the author of the given project wants to present the evolution of religion's functions, its interconnections with other aspects of social life in different historical periods, from the ancient world up to the contemporary age. This paper examines religious values as the existing foundation for today's societies, having presented comprehensive theoretical analysis and case histories. Topics that could be covered within this perspective include; the religious systems of ancient civilizations such as the Egyptians, the Mesopotamians, and Romans; religious systems of medieval world especially in relation to the rise of Christianity and Islamic world; the interaction of religion with the reformation and religious diversity in the early modern world; and finally, the current religious systems especially in relation to social conflicts. Thus, this study enhances an understanding of the tremendous role religion and other associated institutions retain in the management of the society. The findings demonstrate interest in exploring religion and society via multiple perspectives because it is a phenomenon that changes over time.

Keywords: Religion, Religion social history, social unity, governance, cultural advancement, intergroup relations.

I. INTRODUCTION

It cannot be overemphasized how religion has remained a cardinal feature in the functional society from the earliest of times. Being an influential and steady phenomenon of societies' lives, religion defines and is defined by societies' characteristics and standards. The understanding on the way social aspect of religion brings out the impact of religion on social structures, leadership, cultural growth and inter group relations makes the study relevant in the current society. Cognizance of these dynamics is crucial in making senses of the transformation

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of societies as well as the relationships between religions and other spheres of a society.³

Religion is known to have played a central role in the society through offering individuals an opportunity to identify with some power that is considered supreme and through offering purpose and belonging to society. Religion is frequently identified as being closely connected to the political structure in historical societies. For instance, pharaohs of ancient Egyptian and the concept of God-king in Mesopotamia clearly depict how religion influenced the social and political systems. So, the religious festivals and rituals in such societies were not only to manifest the people's beliefs but also as ways of strengthening the communal identity and cultural memory.

During the medieval period the authorities of the church acted and stably influenced the society which structures. In Europe the Christian Church became an established organization exerting influence over feudalism, ethical behavior, and educational structure. Centered on striking legal and social structures grounded on the Sharia, the Islamic civilization was the best example of religious legal and social realism that defined an elaborate and progressive society. In South Asia, the religion that shaped people's roles in the society were Hinduism and Buddhism, where principles such as the caste system and monastic orders provided guidelines to the social organization and stratification.

The early modern era was characterized by changes as movements of religion like reformation brought drastic changes thus altering the society. The future and increasing religious diversification in the Americas and the part played by Confucianism in the regulation of Ming and Qing China are examples of how religion remained an influential force throughout history. The societal structure in the modern world characterized by the secularization process thus saw the changing face of religion and society nexus. Hence, contrary to the expectations that religion was on the decline, it continues to be a powerful feature of present-day politics in social struggles, nationalism, and wars.⁴

(A) Research objectives

- i. To Examine the Role of Religion in Ancient Civilizations
- ii. To Analyze the Impact of Major Religions on Medieval Societies
- iii. To Review Theoretical Frameworks on Religion and Society

³ Evans, Richard Kent. "MOVE: RELIGION, SECULARISM, AND THE POLITICS OF CLASSIFICATION." Diss., Temple University Libraries, 2018. <http://cdm16002.contentdm.oclc.org/cdm/ref/collection/p245801coll10/id/505910>.

⁴ Liss, Annie Parker. "Varieties of religious Americanism: religion, historical writing and political advocacy in the late-nineteenth century." Diss., University of Iowa, 2012. <https://ir.uiowa.edu/etd/3340>.

iv. To Assess the Evolution of Religion's Influence on Modern Social Dynamics

(B) Methodology

The approach that is to be used in this research will be the qualitative historical approach to analyze the societal aspects of religion by historical periods. Data will be obtained through literature on exemplary periods and cultures such as ancient Egyptian, Mesopotamian, Greeks and Romans, Medieval Europe, Islamic and South Asians. The cross-sectional data analysis has been adopted in order to determine and explain general themes as well as variations in regard to roles of religion in shaping societies and their mores. Quantitative and qualitative data and results will be antecedently analyzed and presented in structured format in order to conclusions and recognized findings emphasizing how this help to advance knowledge in chronicling the role of religion in society. Some of the limitations may be including inadequacies in the primary materials, there is bias in history interpretation.

(C) Literature Review

With regards to uncovering the historical realities of religion's relation to societies, religious sociology is a broad category of works that focus on different aspects of religious beliefs, practices, and organizations and their interactions with the broader social environment. This literature review will synthesize works and theories from fields in sociology, anthropology, history and religious studies which concerns the study of religions in ancient and medieval society.

a. Emile Durkheim's Sociological Approach:

One of the initial sources on the social role of religion can be immediately attributed to Emile Durkheim's work, "The Elementary Forms of Religious Life", published in 1912. Durkheim claimed that religion plays a significant role of a social institution that supports social solidarity and common culture. He noted that his objective was to stress the unification of people and the construction of identity due to religious rituals. Durkheim's theory gives emphasis on how religious beliefs help to define behavior and customs hence preserving order in the society.⁵

b. Max Weber's Analysis of Religion and Social Change:

Max Weber's work, The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism published in 1905, presents a study of religion and economy. In relation to this topic, Weber researched on the correlation between Protestant ethics specifically Calvinism and the rise of capitalism in Western Europe. His broader ideas about the function of religion as a way of sanctioning

⁵ Robert, Parker. *Athenian religion: A history*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996.

authority and structuring society are laid out in the “Sociology of Religion” the work written in 1920, which in addition to discussing about sociological types of authority includes the concept of charismatic authority and the process of routinization of religious charisma.

c. Karl Marx’s Critique of Religion :

In taking a keen interest on social realities, Karl Marx had a negative take in analyzing religion for being an opium of the people in the sense that this was being used as a tool by the oppressive classes. For example, in “Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right” (1844) Marxist described religion as “the opium for the people” meant to dull the pains of the oppressed and prevent them from seeking justice. On the basis of what was said above, Marx underlines the function of religion as support of oppression and ideological domination.⁶

d. Religion in Ancient Egypt. :

Scholars like Jan Assmann in "The Search for God in Ancient Egypt" (2001) and Erik Hornung in "Conceptions of God in Ancient Egypt: An anthropological relevance of these texts including, “The One and the Many” (1982) is to demonstrate the importance of religion in ancient Egypt. These works are considering the topic of divine kingship of which pharaohs were believed to represent literal gods in the earthly realm, thereby providing political justification for rulership and social order. While pointing at sacerdotal religious personnel and sacred buildings, Assmann and Hornung underscore the profound significance of temples and religious practices in people’s everyday life and stabilization of socius.

e. Mesopotamian Religion:

Thorkild Jacobsen’s "The Treasures of Darkness: Keith’s “A History of Mesopotamian Religion” (1976) is a well-organized written source, which gives general information on Mesopotamian religion. Jacobsen analyzes the Gods ’images and concepts of the divine; the temples ’economic activities and functions; and the legal and political aspects of religious institutions and the Hammurabi’s Code. His work particularly deals with the relation between religious institutions and the civil authorities in Mesopotamian city-states.⁷

f. Religion and Social Movements:

Scholarly works such as Charles Tilly’s "Social Movements, 1768-2004" (2004) and Rhys H. Williams’s "Cultural Wars in American Politics: The “Mythical Critiques: Critical Reviews of

⁶ Cowie, L. W. "Religion." In *Handbook for History Teachers*, 493–95. London: Routledge, 2021. <http://dx.doi.org/10.4324/9781032163840-65>

⁷ Armstrong, Edward John. "Religion and Disaster in Thucydides’ History." Thesis, The University of Sydney, 2019. <http://hdl.handle.net/2123/20671>

a Popular Myth” (1997) works describe the function of religion in modern movements. These studies demonstrate how religion and religious organizations retain features of the political and social imaginary and practice, and hence how it constrains activism and thought regarding political and social questions.

g. Secularization and Religious Pluralism:

Peter Berger’s “The Sacred Canopy: Karl Mercer and Albert Hirsch’s “Religion and Civilization” (1967) the theories of secularization or religious modernization processes while Rodney Stark and Roger Finke’s “Acts of Faith: Explaining the Human Side of Religion” (2000) deal with religious pluralism in today’s world. Berger analyses the phenomenon of secular and the secularization thesis for the context of the relational decrease of the religion’s role in society and culture while Stark and Finke discuss the possible ways of religious survival and prosperity at the option of numerous and competitive environments.

II. RELIGION IN ANCIENT CIVILIZATIONS

The religion of the ancient Egyptians was polytheistic, and a large number of gods and goddesses was worshipped, each having its own function in everyday life and in the natural world. Some of the most widely worshiped ranked gods were the sun god known as Ra, the god of the afterlife commonly known as Osiris, and Isis, the goddess of motherhood. Temples were core to the functioning of communities through which these deities were worshipped; economic activity was executed and gatherings occurred.

The Concept of Divine Kingship and Its Impact on Political and Social Hierarchies: Egyptians first of all considered the pharaoh to be the god-king in that he was believed to be a deity in human flesh. This divine kingship justified the rule of the pharaoh and consequently reaffirmation of the social order together with political control. It was also apparent that religion and government in the ancient Egypt were intertwined since the pharaoh dual as both a spiritual and political leader of the state. This divine status made it possible to have a centralized power system and coordinate big ventures like the construction of pyramids and temples.

Religious Festivals, Rituals, and Their Role in Maintaining Societal Cohesion: The community religious practices were therefore central to harmonious living as ethically defined and manifested in rituals and festivals. Religious fairs such as Opet and Sed connected the Pharaoh to the divine and served to reinstate the people’s loyalty to the gods and the Pharaoh. These events also insisted on the unity of social, since all sorts of people could attend religious service and celebrations. Similarly, aspects such as offering to gods and prayers to them in the morning and evening were also vital in sustaining religious beliefs and policing of societal

order.

Mesopotamia religion also included polytheistic and their Gods included gods who were believed to be in control of natural features and cities. The god Anu presided over the sky, Enlil the air and the goddess Inanna was the goddess of love and war. Each city state had one or more tutelary deities and the temple, usually known as the ziggurat, was the political and religious focus of the city. This due to the fact that priests had vital responsibilities of interceding between the gods and mortals, and their intervention affected the running of city-states.

It can be observed that the religious beliefs of people influenced the legal frameworks in place. One of the earliest, if not the earliest, legal codes was that of Hammurabi, which according to the legend was said to have been divinely inspired by Shamash, the god of justice. The divine origin endowed the laws with utmost credibility, thereby enhancing the culture of societal hierarchies and fairness. People through laws governed their daily undertakings, business, marriage, crime, and virtually all sectors of life, illustrating a dominant incorporation of religion into governance of society.

Temples were not only sacred buildings or structures but also businesses that thrived in the society and economy. They were, for instance, the owners of extensive tracts of land, employers of labor in their numbers and masters of resources such as grain and stock. Thus, the 'location of religious exchange' implies that the distribution of materials deploys a broader 'infrastructure of the social', establishing a 'material commons' that supports community and sustains social equity for the population at large. Through participation in this economic activity the temple further cemented its position as the societal structure and its ability to shape the social and economic order.

III. RELIGION IN MEDIAEVAL CIVILIZATION

The Middle Ages, also known as the Mediaeval Period, took place in Europe between the sixth and the sixteenth centuries. Religion had a significant impact on the era's politics, culture, and society. During the Middle Ages, when Christianity was the dominant religion, the Catholic Church had a tremendous impact on mediaeval society. The Church constituted a powerful political and social entity, exerting its influence over most of Europe. As the spiritual leader of the Catholic Church, the Pope wielded considerable political authority. Marriage, education, morals, and many other facets of daily life were also impacted by the Church. Religion had an impact on Middle Ages art and architecture. During the Middle Ages, Muslims were equally significant as Christians. Mediaeval Europe was shaped by the long-lasting cultural and intellectual legacy of the vast Islamic empire, which spanned from Spain to India.

IV. RELIGION IN MODERN CIVILIZATION

It should also be pointed out that religion remains relevant in modern civilization, even if current roles and responsibilities differ from its ancient ones. As it is common in today's society, religion is not as influential in modern society as it was during the medieval or early modern age. It coexists with numerous secular beliefs and scientific and technological innovations that have recast it into different roles in society and in the home in the contemporary world. Secularization, which has been mainly diagnosed in societies of the West, has resulted in the decline of conventional organized religion and the embrace of spirituality. But this does not mean the disappearance of religion but an evolution due to various social, political, and technological revolutions.

Another factor with relation to globalization is also seen to have an impact on the function of religion in civilizing the modern world. The integration of many societies has made it easier for different concepts of religion to spread to different nations; hence, people of many societies have become more religious than before. This has led to religious tolerance and even more interaction than what has ever been observed before, therefore resulting in a more diverse religious fabric. For this reason, the trends towards the setting up of interfaith dialogues represent positive processes aimed at improved relations with other religious communities, for instance, accomplishing tasks and objectives connected with concerns like peacefulness, ecological preservation, and social equity. Nevertheless, conflicts that are most generated by globalization involve religious, national, ethnic, or cultural divides, as observed in some of the geopolitical struggles.

Another important dimension in determining the new role of religion in modernity is the changes that have taken place in the connection between religion and modern science. Although religion and science for most of history were seen as enemies within society, modern civilization has seen another altercation of this. Religious organizations have devised some ways of compromising with things science as pertaining to evolution, bioethics, and the environment, among other things. On the other hand, some religious factions keep on opposing or ignoring individual scientific developments they see as prohibited by their religious beliefs. This dynamic interaction thus throws light on the constant process of the drawing of boundaries between the religious and the rational in the contemporary Western world.

The use of digital technology in religious practices and the formation of religious communities has taken on new expressions. The internet and social media applications have slowly emerged as the new field of religious practice, where disciples can gather, pray, or discuss the gospel on

the Internet, no matter the distance that separates them. Cyberspace religion and home worship have become trends, which prove that religion also has a future in cyberspace. This reinvention process has led to a process of democratization of religious practice in that people can interact with their religion as they see fit. However, it has also directed concerns towards the real and profound nature of religious practice, which has been discovered in a virtual context as compared to actual physical worship. As is known, the role of digital technology increases year after year; thus, it is predicted that it will also influence religion in modern society in terms of the practices and perceptions.

V. ORIGIN OF RELIGION IN INDIA

Religions of India have a long history as they are rooted in the culture of the ancient country, being a part of Indians' traditions. Some of the major religions that originated in India are Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism, and each played a significant role in the religious giants of the sub-sahara continent. Religion in the Indian context dates back to the Indus Valley civilization, though the religious historical period begins with the age of Vedas. In the long run, the Upanishads came up with philosophies that negated rituals, and this accelerated the invention of new religions such as Buddhism and Jainism.

In medieval times, the doctrines of Bhakti and Sufi movements and popularization of the doctrines of personal devotion and spiritual equality also influenced the religious life of India. Sikhism is one of the youngest religions that began its course in the 15th century, having mixed principles of Hinduism and Islam with a main spirit of monotheism and social justice system. The British colonial period began several social reform movements that aimed to reform Hinduism and also sensitive social problems. Presently, India is one of the most religiously diverse countries in the world where spirituality is interwoven with the secularism that is seen in modern India and still impacts the country's culture, politics, and social life.

VI. SOCIETAL IMPACT OF RELIGION

Culture has equally been defined as playing a central role in determining societies, especially in relation to beliefs, power, and behavior. It has been the guide to proper conduct and has helped in fostering unity of the people and order in the society. However, one can agree with the statement that religion has been a source of unity, majorly in so many societies, in as much as it has provided an identity to its followers.⁸ However, religion remains a cause of conflict whereby conflicts erupt where there is a clash of religious affiliations or religious belief systems

⁸ Fagan, P. F. (2006). Why religion matters even more: The impact of religious practice on social stability.

conflict with secular or other religious systems.

To summarize, religion remains relevant in modern society in a number of characteristics. Politics is an aspect of it as it participates in policies and sets the tone for the public with political statements on matters like human rights, education, or health, among others. There is a positive demonstration that religious organizations and faith-based organizations play a pivotal role in enhancing social welfare since they offer social needs that comprise education, health care, and even disaster assistance. Nonetheless, religion can also be problematic for social advancements when it is at odds with postmodern concepts like gender and sexual orientation. Taken collectively, religion is indeed a key player in the ever-evolving process of social organization and justice and has been as much then as it is now.

VII. CONCLUSION

This research reveals complex ways and elements of the religion's influence on the formation of the societal structures and values during various epochs. The analysis of how religion has manifested itself at different epoch illustrates how political authority and governments; social organization and status; and material culture at pre-classical Egypt and Mesopotamia, classical Greece and Rome, medieval Christianity and Islam, Hindu India, and Buddhist Southeast Asia were fashioned. Religion has remained relevant in human societies by influencing governance, laws and general social order of society.⁹

When comparing these two domains or fields, one can clearly see that religion remains a significant force in society, while its functions continuously change. As shown by the case of the Egyptian pharaohs, African kingdoms and empires, the followers of the Islamic Shari'a and the Indian castes we seen different forms and manifestations of religion's interactions with society and vice versa. Further, it gives understanding concerns current changes in the process of secularization and religious diversity and tolerant, stressing the roles of religion in today's society.

In general, this research helps to enhance the knowledge of the social factors of religious beliefs together with the integration of historiography and theory, which are useful in comprehending the old roles of religion in societies as well as the present ones. As we see that laws related with the religion itself is a sanction. Contemporary laws are made in consensus with religion, even the government has not enacted any law which is against the principles of religion.

⁹ Rydving, Håkan. "Scandinavian-Saami religious connections in the history of research." *Scripta Instituti Donneriani Aboensis* 13 (January 1, 1990): 358–73. <http://dx.doi.org/10.30674/scripta.67185>

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