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Sociological Evaluation of the Concept of Religion

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ABSTRACT

Although religious convictions may be deeply personal, religion is also a social institution. Religious views, behaviours, and norms are recognised by social scientists as an ordered and interconnected collection of beliefs, behaviours, and norms based on common social needs and values. The research paper in question seeks to analyze the origin, history, functions, and evolution of religion from a sociological approach.

Keywords: *Sociology of Religion, Religion Sociological Theories, Culture, Functions, Spirituality.*

I. INTRODUCTION

The analysis of religious views, traditions, and organisational structures utilising sociological tools and approaches is known as sociology of religion. Sociology of Religion looks at every part of religion, from what people believe to how they participate in prayer and live out their claimed beliefs. It looks at how faith is evolving in the public sphere (politics, economy, and media) as well as in personal relationships.

Early pioneering figures such as Emile Durkheim and Max Weber wrote widely on the place and purpose of faith in human culture, and the analysis of religion was historically fundamental to the discipline of sociology. Emile Durkheim's dissertation on religion inspired the structural-functional approach to religion. Durkheim proposed that religion serves three major roles in society: it provides social harmony by fostering social unity by common practices and values, it provides social influence by enforcing religious-based morality and standards, and it offers meaning and purpose by providing answers to existential questions.

While sociologists expected science to replace religion, it did not happen. Instead, religion has evolved in order to accommodate the present requirements of society. A significant change has been the development of Consumer Societies. Sociologists have attempted to define consumer activities as religions but it cannot be replaced.

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(A) Research Methodology

The research paper in question is written using a combination of qualitative and doctrinal research. The authors analyzed secondary references such as current literature, academic articles, case studies, surveys, and data, among others.

(B) Definition of Religion from a Sociological Perspective

Religion is derived from the Latin word 'religio' i.e., respect for what is sacred and 'religare' i.e., to tie, in the sense of an obligation. It is made up of "things that surpass the limits of our knowledge", as pioneering sociologist Émile Durkheim (1915) put it. Religion, he continued, is "a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say set apart and forbidden, beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community, called a church, all those who adhere to them". Some people equate religion with places of worship (such as a temple or church), while others associate it with a ritual (such as repentance or meditation), and even others with a philosophy that governs their everyday lives (like dharma or sin). Religion is a system of principles, traditions, and activities concerning what an individual keeps holy or believes to be religiously important, according to many of these people.

Religion is a societal structure, notwithstanding the fact that religious views may be extremely personal. Religious views, behaviours, and norms are recognised by social scientists as an ordered and interconnected collection of beliefs, behaviours, and norms based on common social needs and values. Furthermore, religion is a spiritual universal that exists across all social classes. Funeral rituals, for example, are performed in every society in some manner, but these traditions differ across cultures and religious affiliations. Despite variations, there are certain similar elements of a death ceremony, such as the declaration of the death, the treatment of the dead, the disposition, and the ceremonya. These universals, as well as the variations between how cultures and people view religion, provide sociological research content.

Sociologists study religion by separating what they call a religion's experience, beliefs, and practises. The feeling that we are connected to "the spiritual" is referred to as religious experience. When people pray or meditate, they can encounter this kind of communion. Religious beliefs are specific concepts that adherents of a particular religion believe to be valid. Religious practises such as bar mitzvah or confession of sins, are activities that are necessary or requested of members of a certain community (Barkan and Greenwood, 2003).

II. HISTORY OF RELIGION FROM A SOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

Three social philosophers, Émile Durkheim, Max Weber, and Karl Marx, sought to investigate

the interaction between religion and society in the aftermath of nineteenth-century European industrialization and secularisation. They are considered to be among the pioneers of modern sociology.

As previously mentioned, Émile Durkheim (1915) described religion as a "unified system of beliefs and practises relative to sacred things". Sacred meant something special to him, something that encouraged awe and appeared to be linked to the idea of "the divine." When there is a separation between the profane and the sacred, according to Durkheim, "religion happens" in culture.

Durkheim is widely regarded as the first sociologist to investigate religion's social implications. Above all, he concluded that religion is about society: it brings people together (social cohesion), encourages continuity of actions (social control), and provides support through life's transformations and tragedies (meaning and purpose). Durkheim claimed that the basis of religion and morality is society's universal mind-set, and that the unified structures of social order are the product of shared beliefs in a community, by applying natural science methods to the study of society. He argued that certain ideals would be preserved in order to ensure societal harmony.

What will do, though, if religion were to vanish? This issue led Durkheim to the conclusion that religion is more than a social phenomenon; it is a symbol of societal strength: as people celebrate sacred objects, they are celebrating the strength of their society. According to this logic, even if traditional religion were to vanish, society would not immediately disintegrate.

So while Durkheim saw religion as a means of social harmony, Max Weber, a German sociologist and political theorist, saw it as a catalyst for social reform. He looked at the impact of faith on economic activity and discovered that strongly Protestant nations, such as the Netherlands, England, Scotland, and Germany, had the most established industrial societies and the most prosperous business leaders.

III. SOCIOLOGICAL THEORIES OF RELIGION

Durkheim, Weber, and Marx are three early sociological thinkers whose theories appear to have a significant impact on religion sociology.

Despite the fact that none of these three men were strongly religious, they were all fascinated by religion's influence over individuals and cultures. They concluded that religion is simply an illusion; since culture and place have such a strong effect on religion, they thought it unlikely

that religion provides a fundamental truth of life. They also predicted that religion's popularity and impact over the human mind would wane with time.

(A) Theory of functionalism by Durkheim

The father of functionalism, Emile Durkheim, spent most of his academic life researching religions, especially those of small communities. He was mainly involved in totetism, or the ancient kinship structure of Australian aborigines as a "elementary" type of religion. Durkheim's book The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life, published in 1921, is unquestionably the most well-known thesis on the sociology of faith. Durkheim interpreted faith in the light of culture as a whole, acknowledging its function in shaping people's thoughts and behaviour.

People, according to Durkheim, seek to distinguish holy religious images, artefacts, and practises from profane everyday symbols, objects, and habits of life. Sacred artefacts are often thought to have religious properties that distinguish them from non-sacred objects. Particularly in more modern civilizations, holy artefacts are always seen with respect and admiration, even though they do not think the objects have any unique force.

Religion, according to Durkheim, entails not only belief, but also daily practises and ceremonies performed by a community of adherents, which establish and reinforce a sense of group unity. Rituals are important for religious groups to stay together, and they help people to avoid the boring facets of everyday life and enter higher realms of knowledge. Births, weddings, periods of trouble, and deaths are all moments when sacred rites and ceremonies are particularly significant.

The functionalist approach to sociological issues is exemplified by Durkheim's philosophy of faith. People see faith as contributing to the wellbeing and continuation of civilization in general, according to Durkheim. As a result, faith serves to unite society's participants by urging them to regularly reinforce their shared ideals and convictions.

As culture modernises, Durkheim projected that religion's strength would wane. He predicted that rational thought would eventually supplant divine thinking, with rites and ceremonies receiving merely sporadic consideration. He also believed that the idea of "God" was on the brink of being obsolete. Instead, he saw culture as encouraging civil worship, in which civic festivals, parades, and pride, for example, will take the place of religious services. He claimed that if orthodox religion were to survive, it would only do so as a way of maintaining societal stability and order.

(B) Theory of Social Change by Weber

About the fact that Durkheim believed that his hypothesis extended to all religions, he focused his findings on a small number of cases. In the other side, Max Weber began a large-scale analysis of religions all over the world. His main focus was on big, multinational religions with millions of adherents. He studied Ancient Judaism, Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Taoism in detail. Weber investigated the effect of Christianity on Western thinking and society through The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism).

Weber's study was mostly focused on determining the effect of faith on social progress. Weber saw the origins of capitalism in Protestantism, especially the "Protestant Work Ethic." Weber saw obstacles to liberalism in Eastern faiths. Hinduism, for example, emphasises escaping the toils of the mundane human environment in order to achieve greater degrees of spirituality. Such a mindset does not apply itself well to earning and saving capital.

Christianity, according to Weber, is a redemption faith that argues that individuals will be "saved" after converting to such values and moral codes. The concept of "evil" and its atonement by God's grace is central to Christianity. Unlike Eastern traditions, which take a passive approach, redemption religions such as Christianity take an aggressive approach, including constant battles toward guilt and destructive facets of culture.

(C) Conflict Theory by Marx

Karl Marx was not religious and never studied religion in depth, despite his impact on the topic. Marx's theories on faith were influenced by 19th-century philosophers and theologians such as Ludwig Feuerbach, author of The Essence of Christianity (1841). People don't grasp society, but they transfer their own culture based norms and beliefs into separate beings including stars, ghosts, angels, and demons, according to Feuerbach. Humans will fulfil their ideals in this universe rather than in the afterlife, according to Feuerbach, until they know they have projected their own values into faith.

Religion, according to Marx, is the "opium of the nations." Religion, he believed, taught people to embrace their present situation in life, no matter how terrible it was, thus deferring benefits and satisfaction to an afterlife. Religion, the the other hand, prevents societal reform through teaching non-resistance against inequality, diverting people's minds away from earthly injustices, defending power and income disparities for the wealthy, and emphasising future benefits.

While it is widely assumed that Marx did not believe in faith, this is not exactly accurate. Marx believed that faith was a safe haven from the harsh realities of daily existence and strong injustice. Nonetheless, he expected that secular religion would fade away in the future.

IV. THE FUNCTIONS THAT RELIGION SERVES FOR A SOCIETY

Émile Durkheim emphasised the functions of religion for society in all of his writing, regardless of how it is exercised or what individual religious views a society prefers. Durkheim's ideas about the roles of religion appear to affect sociological theory today.

A. To begin with, religion brings existence **meaning and purpose.** Many aspects of life are difficult to fathom. It was clearly true in prehistoric times, as we have seen, but still in today's increasingly scientific era, something of life and death remains a mystery, and religious faith and religion assist many people in making sense of what science cannot teach us.

B. Second, religion contributes to **social harmony and peace.** One of Durkheim's most valuable observations was this. Religion helps to keep society stable in at least two respects. First, it provides citizens with a shared collection of values, making it an effective socialisation agent . Second, public religious ritual, physically brings people together, promotes interaction and other forms of social contact, and therefore reinforces social ties.

C. The third role of religion is linked to the previous one. Religion acts as a **social control agent** that helps to maintain social order. Religion instils universal values in individuals, allowing them to understand how to be **responsible civilians.**

D. **Better psychological and physical health** is a fourth feature of religion. Religious belief and tradition can improve psychological well-being by providing support to people in times of crisis and increasing social contact in places of worship. Religious people, not just the aged, are happier and more content with their lives, according to several surveys. Religiosity even seems to improve overall fitness, and certain reports also show that religious people live longer than non-religious people (Moberg, 2008).

E. Finally, religion has the potential to inspire individuals to advocate towards **meaningful social progress.** A few decades back, religion played a crucial part in the growth of the Southern civil rights movement. Martin Luther King Jr. and other civil rights leaders risked their life to desegregate the South because of their religious beliefs. In the South, black churches were also used to hold assemblies, attract new participants, and collect funds for the civil rights movement (Morris, 1984).

V. THE EVOLUTION OF RELIGION

French sociologist Emile Durkheim predicted during the first half of the 20th century that religion would not be needed by the modern society and instead a complex form would develop based on rational thinking and secular institutions. He wasn't alone. Victorian evolutionary thinker James Frazer had theorised that humanity's mental stages go from magic to religion to science. It was considered that science would be a more relevant means of satisfying human needs.

The present Israel – Palestine conflict is a significant example that portrays how religion still holds a significant place in our societies. It is a tussle between Jews and Palestinians over occupation of land. Israel demolished residential and livelihood structures of Palestinian people living in the Gaza Strip. It is an act of human rights violation according to the United Nation's Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA). Unnecessary loss of lives has occurred and keeps occurring in the name of religion throughout the world. Such instances range from the aforementioned conflict in Israel to minor ones that do not even get media coverage but still occur in our societies.

While religion is still capable of inflicting violence it has on the other hand evolved too. It no longer stands in the way of love as it used to. More openness to inter-faith marriages is developing slowly.

Religion no longer dominates the society to the extent it used to. People now have the freedom to choose not to practise any religion or belief. They also have the option to only choose and pick parts of their religion that suits their beliefs and lifestyle or even learn from different religions. While they may not convert, they do instil practices from other religions. Hybrid forms of religion are formed due to migration, secularisation and individualisation. This has been termed as MRB – Multiple Religious Belongings. This phenomenon has been observed in Netherlands. People can no longer be forced to commit to religions or practices that they find against their personal values. They have the freedom to choose or discard those notions that do not fit their lives. For example, it has been observed recently that Hindu brides are against the custom of Kanyadaan which literally translates to donating the maiden. It is considered to be an integral ritual in a Hindu wedding but since it signifies donating the bride and her responsibilities from one man (the father) to another (the groom), it treats women as property which goes against some women's feminist ideology and therefore is not performed upon their insistence to the priests performing the wedding rites.

VI. EVOLUTION OF RELIGION TO SPIRITUALITY

The word spirituality comes from the Latin word 'spiritualitas' which was derived from the Greek word pneuma which means spirit. While the word holds significance in regular parlance to such an extent that people identify themselves as "spiritual", there is no concrete definition of the word. It is used as the opposite of materiality and concerns itself with the human spirit.

The term 'spiritual' is considered inadequate as a tool for scholarly analysis. In studies in which people were asked to describe themselves as religious or spiritual, the results indicated that people identify themselves as spiritual and religious. This can be pinned to the wide-ranging meaning of the term. Due to this it is not yet feasible for research (Chapter Two. Real Religion And Fuzzy Spirituality? Taking Sides In The Sociology Of Religion, 2010). It is therefore a diverse concept.

Tacey attempts to explain the phenomenon of why people go from their religion to spirituality in the form of a universal archetype.

1. First is the **Natal Faith**. It is the faith in which one is born and inducted into. It includes conforming to the religious traditions and institutions.

2. The second stage is called **Adolescent Separation** during which the person starts questioning the religion and does not find adequate answers to those.

3. The third stage is **Secular Identification**. The person either loses contact with the natal faith or renounces institutional affiliation with it. They start identifying themselves as a secular humanist, agnostic or atheist. They are left to make up their own mind on it if the parents have also relinquished ties with the religion.

4. This leads to the stage of **Secular Disillusionment** where there only remains mere consumerism in the form of holidays and entertainment. The person does not find fulfilment because and no form of connection to the sacred.

5. In the final stage the person develops his or her own **Adult Secular Spirituality** outside of their religion and its institutions such as their place of worship.

The reasons behind this conversion are explained through the responses recorded in the study according to which people do not have an issue with the structure of the community but the content of their beliefs which does not let them have their own narratives on their spirituality and beliefs. The people simply do not want to be controlled by their religion.

The acronym SBNR stands for Spiritual But Not Religious. Certain people describe themselves as spiritual but do not wish to be bound by the dogmas of their religion. (Van Niekerk, 2021)

VII. THE NEW CONSUMER SOCIETY

A consumer society can be defined as a society where people's consumption goes beyond the subsistence level required for survival. It forms an interdependent web in which people obtain goods and services from others rather than self - production. People judge themselves as well as others based on their consumptions, which is considered an appropriate and acceptable activity.

The present consumer society is believed to be a result of several changes in society. Breaking down of religious norms gave individuals the freedom to deviate and follow the religion of their choice and not be tied down to the one imposed on them by their parents since birth. And since people are no longer bound or restricted by their religion, they get to choose aspects that fit and suit their lifestyle and value and belief system. This gives the individual more freedom to choose over matters of importance to them such as their identity, which includes their religion and beliefs. Religion is no longer linked to authority as it used to be. Instead, it is associated with individualistic values and self – realization.

The modern world is full of options due to the consistent rise of the capitalist model which aims at attracting customers to their products and services in order to make profits. Therefore, there are more options available to the individual to decide what to spend their time and disposable income on with no compulsion to include religion. People no longer depend on religion for services such as medical aid which used to be part of their services. State governments have taken it upon themselves to provide people with their basic needs and requirements through welfare schemes and various kinds of insurances. This gives people more individual security which used to be part of religions' roles and responsibilities. Similarly, religion used to be responsible for disseminating knowledge and information. This role was replaced by the rise of science and eventually institutions such as schools and colleges started competing for this role. Disturbed individuals had available to themselves "pastoral care" or they could go for the secular alternative – psychotherapy.

Lastly the world is now a global village. More and more people are able to travel across the world not just physically but even through the virtual world of screens and internet. Knowledge and information are not just limited to what is available to an individual in his or her immediate surroundings. That means that they are not limited to information about their own religion and those around them. They can learn about the practices, beliefs and values of any religion in any corner of the world. In conclusion people have more choices, resources to access those choices. And since religion has become a voluntary association, it needs to engage in practices similar

to businesses providing goods and services in order to stay relevant and continue their existence. They therefore engage in marketing and branding. (Stolz and Usunier, 2019) A few big examples are the Dalai Lama, religious books and texts, and the laughing Buddha statues.

Studies have shown that people expect their religious services to be of high quality, entertaining and ultimately the right to choose what they get into but at the same time members of the organization believe that treating their religion as customers leads to loss of the central message and goals of the religion. Selling anything involves manipulation to a certain degree as it requires appealing the masses which is not the aim of religions. It might lead to blurring of lines between the secular and religious. Which may not necessarily be a bad thing as it benefits the people ultimately but at the same time it reduces itself to the level of other businesses selling products and services.

VIII. CONSUMERISM - A FORM OF RELIGION

While the details vary, the point is that components and/or functions that were historically associated with religion can now be found in seemingly secular realms of life. Religion used to provide meaning, integrate social groups, legitimize social structures, and help people to accept disaster and sorrow while also allowing them to experience periods of frenzy and enthusiasm. These are still experienced today but in a different context such as video games, television shows like anime, sports and pop concerts. These phenomena include certain elements of religion and spirituality such as transcendence but they are not capable of replacing the existing form of religions. (Stolz and Usunier, 2019)

IX. CONCLUSION

Religion held a significant place in the lives of people to the extent of overpowering other institutions such that it was the ultimate authority. It served the role of several institution which eventually branched out. The people no longer need religion. It was believed that religion would become a redundant aspect of society but instead it continues to exist although with noticeable modifications to suit the present society. The present form has its own set of considerable advantages and disadvantages. The development of a Consumer Society has converted religion into a sort of business. It is a constant struggle to keep it relevant without becoming a business and losing its tenets. There are new 'religions' such as sports and pop concerts but they cannot take place of traditional religions.

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