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Diversity and Heterogeneity in Religious Theories and Analysis and Enrichment of Sociological Knowledge

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Abstract:

The study of religious beliefs and practices has always remained at the center of sociological polemics. For decades, social theorists have tried to theorize and understand the various facets of religion. However, their exegeses of religion have, on many occasions, been found to be disparate. But such varied ratiocinations and interpretations of religion have only broadened and deepened our understanding of religious beliefs. This paper is an attempt to look into the views of some of the prominent sociologists and social anthropologists on religion and make an informed analysis of the differing observations. An attempt is also made to trace the trajectory of religious discourses in recent years and their causes and consequences.

Keywords: *collective conscience; high modernity; profane & sacred; reflexivity; theodicy of privilege;*

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1. Introduction

Religion has always remained one of the prominent discourses in sociological analysis. There is hardly any known society where belief in supernatural forces is not found. Social thinkers have been struck not only by the universal existence of religion but also by its persistence and continuity since time immemorial. They have tried to theorize and explain various dimensions of religion – its origin, its social role, its continuity and changes in its manifestations with the steady “modernization” of human societies.

But all these analysis have not been compatible or congruous. Dialectics and polemics in religious discourses are very much palpable. While some theories have seen religion as promoting social solidarity, others have highlighted its dysfunctional role in spawning social conflict. While some theorists have seen religion as a regressional force, others have highlighted its dynamic role in social change. Analyses and interpretations of religion have seen immense multiplicity- some of them even being contradictory and antithetical to each other.

But all these diverse viewpoints and conflicting opinions have led to a profound deepening in our understanding of religion as a social-psychological phenomenon. Diversity in opinions and the acknowledgement and appreciation of such diversity is the essence of the broadening of the horizon of sociological knowledge. To put it in Hegelian terms (though quite reductively), as a consequence of dialectics (thesis, antithesis and synthesis) of such standpoints, new areas of sociological knowledge about religion have come up. Such expansion in our sociological knowledge does not remain confined to religion alone. It has spilled over to other dimensions of social knowledge as well – kinship, culture, politics, mobilization, gender, charisma, etc.

2. Social Thinkers on Religion & Its Impact on Society

A thing as complex as religion is not easy to define. However, some sociologists have made laudable attempts in defining religion with a view to capture its essence and core components. Robertson [1970: 2] states that religion “refers to the existence of supernatural beings which have a governing effect on life”. M. Yinger defines religion “as a system of beliefs and practices by means of which a group of people struggles with the ultimate problems of human life.” [cited in Hamilton 2001: 19].

The most well-known definition of religion is the one given by Durkheim (1995, first English publication 1915). He defines religion as “a unified systems of beliefs and practices relating to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden – beliefs and practices that unite into one single moral community called a church, all those who adhere to them”. [Durkheim 1995: 44].

Durkheim’s definition of religion is based on his conceptions of the sacred and the profane. Every society divides its world-view into two categories – SACRED and PROFANE [ibid.: 34-37] A sacred is something which is set apart and held in reverence. It belongs to the sphere of the supernatural entity. It is out of man’s control and so is worshipped. Religion belongs to the domain of the sacred. Profane includes all those mundane and worldly things which are not sacred. A sacred is, in fact, a symbol – an object, a plant, an animal or God. It is a visible manifestation of the supernatural entity. It is not the intrinsic property of an object that makes it sacred; rather the social value that is attached to it. For example, cow-dung is being held sacred by Hindus.

From the various definitions, some basic inferences about religion can be drawn. Religion is a coherent system of beliefs, practices and rites concerning a supernatural entity. Religious beliefs and practices are often institutionalized. It is a system that has an implication of social behavior for its adherents.

Though social thinkers have dwelt quite extensively upon the origin of religion and its earliest forms [for instance, Animism by Tylor (1970), Naturism by Max Muller (discussed in Durkheim 1995:68-83) and Totemism by Durkheim (1995: 84-97)], it is the social significance of religion and its impact on society that has attracted maximum attention. The social and psychological dimensions of religion have not only witnessed the maximum number of theoretical formulations but also the most animated debates, points and counter-points in sociological discourses on religion.

Perhaps the most apt way to start our deliberations on the socio-psychological dimension of religion is to discuss the Marxian perspective on religion. Marx held that religious feelings are most profound in societies characterized by the mode of production based on the asymmetric and exploitative relations between the haves (owners of means of production) and the have-nots (the working class). As capitalism epitomizes this oppressive relationship, religious beliefs and feelings are found in its most intense form. To Marx, religion is just an illusion – something that stupefies the working class and makes their abominable life more bearable.

“Religious distress is at the same time the expression of real distress and the protest against the real distress. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creatures, the heart of the heartless world, the spirit of a spiritless soul. It is the opium of the masses. The abolition of religion as the illusory happiness of the people is required for their real happiness. The demand to give up the illusion about its condition is the demand to give up a condition that needs illusions”.

Karl Marx (1843) “A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of the Right”.

To Marx, religion acts as the opiate for the masses to dull the pain produced by oppression. It is simply a misguided attempt to make life more bearable. Religion eases the pain in the following ways. At first, it promises a paradise of eternal bliss in life after death. Secondly, some religions make a virtue of this sufferings produced by oppression. In particular, those who bear the deprivations of poverty with dignity and humility will be rewarded for their virtue. Thirdly, religion often justifies the social order and a person’s position within it. God can be seen as creating and ordaining the social structure.

Religion does not simply cushion the effects of oppression; it also acts as an instrument of that oppression. It acts as a mechanism of social control, maintaining the existing system of exploitation and reinforcing class relationships. By making unsatisfactory life unbearable, religion tends to discourage people from attempting to change their situation. Religion distorts reality. It helps to produce a false class consciousness which blinds members of the subject class to their true situation

Marx believed that religion would not exist in a communist utopia because the social conditions that produce it would disappear. In a communist society, forces of production would be communally owned, there would be no classes and all exploitation would end. Religion would no longer be needed as men of the communist society would be satisfied and full-filled as human beings. They would control their own destinies and work together for the common good.

We discuss the merits or demerits of Marxian theory later on in the paper along with other theories. But it must be averred that Marx’s observations on religion are highly penetrating and the insights of this genius has led to a flurry of social researches all over the world on religious beliefs and practices and on how religion is being viewed by its adherents.

A completely different (rather antithetical) view on religion comes from the functionalists. Functionalism assumes that religion is a social institution that meets the “functional pre-requisites” or certain basic needs of the society and, in the process, promotes social solidarity and cohesion.

Durkheim’s views on religion stand out in this regard. According to Durkheim (as already mentioned), every society divides its world-view between the Sacred and the Profane and religion belongs to the sphere of the sacred. A perusal of the definition of religion by Durkheim would also show that every religion has two basic components.

- Beliefs – refers to the knowledge of the divine, its powers and moral prescriptions.
- Rites – refers to collective religious ceremonies, rituals and practices.

To Durkheim, both beliefs and collective worship reinforce the shared morals and values of a society and strengthen its collective conscience. Religious beliefs along with their moral prescriptions and taboos act as the agency of social control. During collective observation of rituals, the social group comes together and expresses their faith in common values and beliefs. In this highly charged atmosphere of get-together, the collective conscience is reinforced and social solidarity strengthened.

Durkheim’s view on religion is based on his study of the aborigines of Australia. He considers their religion the simplest one and calls it Totemism [Durkheim 1995: 84]. Australian aborigines are divided into many clans. Each clan is represented by a totem which acts as the emblem of the clan. A totem is actually a symbol – an object, a plant, an animal or a mythical ancestor. It is sacred, held in reverence and is worshipped.

Here Durkheim draws a parallel between the religion and the society. He holds that in worshipping God, man is actually worshipping his society. Since the totem is, at once, the symbol of the sacred and the society (clan), so they both represent the same thing. Throughout history, man has worshipped nothing but only collective social reality. Religion is nothing but society personified and divinized. A man worships God only because it is easier for him to direct his feelings towards a symbol rather than towards so complex a thing as society.

Malinowski (1954) also puts forward a functionalist view of religion. Like Durkheim, Malinowski uses data from small-scale non-literate societies (Trobriand Islanders off New Guinea). Like Durkheim, Malinowski sees religion as reinforcing social norms and values promoting social solidarity. Unlike Durkheim, however, he does not see religion reflecting society as a whole, nor does he see religious rituals as the worship of society itself. Malinowski identifies specific areas of social life with which religion is concerned. These are situations of emotional stress which threaten social solidarity.

Anxiety and tension tend to disrupt social life. Situations which produce these emotions include “crisis of life” such as birth, puberty, marriage and death. Malinowski notes that in all societies these life crises are surrounded with religious rituals. He sees death as the most disruptive of these events and argues that “the existence of strong personal attachments and the fact of death, which of all human events is the most upsetting and disorganizing to man’s calculations, are perhaps the main sources of religious beliefs.” [cited in Holborn: 2013:433]. Religion deals with the problem of death in following manner. A funeral ceremony expresses the belief in immortality and so comforts the bereaved. This comfort checks the emotions which death produces, and controls the stress and anxiety which might disrupt society. At a funeral ceremony, the social group unites to support the bereaved. This expression of social solidarity re-integrates society. In the same manner, religious rituals also help individuals to cope with other uncertainties of life and other crises.

Max Weber (1958) comes up with a completely new perspective on religion where he highlights the dynamic role of religion in bringing about social change. Weber shows how the ethics of ascetic Protestantism helped in the growth of modern capitalism.

Weber found that most of the big capitalists and businessmen professed Protestant religion. This prompted him to find a causal relationship between Protestant ethic and spirit of capitalism. In order to do so, he constructs the ideal types of both.

To Weber, modern capitalism is not founded upon the reckless pursuit of personal gain, but upon the disciplined obligation of work as a duty. Thirst for money-making for its own sake is the essence of modern capitalism. All these require high entrepreneur skill, hard work, dedication, rational conduct and frugal living.

Weber highlights the following tenets of Calvinism.

- Doctrine of pre-destination – only few people are chosen by God to reach heaven and this decision of God is immutable. Further, this will of God is immutable.
- This worldly-asceticism – Calvinists believe in rigorous self-discipline. Money should not be spent on luxury and time should not be wasted.
- concept of calling – a work is a calling or mission to be done with devotion. Success in one’s calling means that the individual has not fallen in God’s grace.

The doctrine of pre-destination creates anxiety among the Protestants. One is not sure whether one is chosen or not. Further, since God’s will is immutable, recourse to Church cannot enable him to attain salvation. For Calvinists, success in one’s professional activity by treating it as one’s calling is the only sign of his selection. This worldly-asceticism also prevents a Protestant from wasting money. For him, there is only one outlet for money – to be reinvested in capital. The notion of fixed calling also provides an ethical basis for modern division of labor.

Thus, for a Protestant, making money becomes both a religious and a business ethic. Weber considers Protestant ethic to be an important source of rationalization of life, which helped to create the spirit of capitalism.

To substantiate his claim, Weber also makes a comparative study of world religions. Confucianism in China laid stress on traditionalism and family obligations which was against the pursuit of capitalism. In Hinduism, caste system and the doctrine of ‘karma’ and ‘moksha’ made the growth of capitalism difficult.

Other aspects of religion have also been theorized upon. One of the most important is the study of religious sacrifices by Mauss and Hubert (1964). They concentrated their investigation on Hindu Vedic and Hebrew sacrifices. To them, “sacrifice is a religious act which, through the consecration of a victim, modifies the condition of the moral person who accomplishes it or that of certain objects with which he is concerned.” [Mauss and Hubert: 1964]. A sacrifice establishes a relationship between the realms of the sacred and the profane. This occurs through the mediation of the ritually slain victim, which acts as a buffer between the two realms and through participation in a sacred meal.

Another aspect of religion widely deliberated upon is the relation between magic, religion and science. Positivists and evolutionists tried to contrast religion with science. They believed that as science would advance, religion would lose its significance. Comte (1858) held that society progresses through three stages 1) theological 2) metaphysical and 3) scientific. After third stage is reached, religion loses its significance. Herbert Spencer, while enumerating his evolutionary scheme, holds that in primitive societies there is worshipping of ghosts and spirits. This is followed by polytheism and monotheism. At last, science advances. Religion based on God fades away. Finally, agnosticism becomes the religion of the scientific world [Mingardi 2013].

Frazer (1922) draws a distinction between religion and magic. Efforts to control the nature for day-to-day survival led early man to resort to magical powers. Only after finding out the limitations of magical rites, man was driven towards making appeals to higher supernatural order. Thus, religion came into being. Religion implies man’s inability to control the nature. Magical rites imply that the man has the confidence of controlling the nature. This attitude makes magical rites akin to scientific procedures. Hence, Frazer calls magic a pseudo-science.

Malinowski (1954) holds that science belongs to the domain of the profane and religion and magic to the domain of the sacred. Based on his study of the Trobriand Islanders, Malinowski held that every primitive community has a considerable store of knowledge, based on experience and reasoning. Malinowski calls this the profane side of life. He shows that while making boats and canoes, the Trobriand islanders are perfect technicians and have a sound body of knowledge. They know how a boat is made to have a certain shape, how it floats and how it sinks. Since primitive knowledge of Trobriand Islanders exhibit elements of rationality, it can be considered the rudimentary form of science.

Despite all efforts, man is not able to achieve the desired results because of some unforeseen events. To control these unknown set of conditions, man resorts to magic. To Malinowski, religion has its genesis in the emotional stress of individuals, associated with phenomenon like death, failures, catastrophes etc. When man realizes the impotency of his rational actions and finds it difficult to control certain phenomenon, he looks to supernatural powers for their favors.

Another aspect of religion discussed extensively is the role and form of religion in modern and post-modern societies. Giddens (1991) holds that modern societies have moved into a higher phase of high modernity characterized by increased reflexivity,

rationalization and differentiation. High modernity provides the condition for resurgence of religion. This lies in the consequences of modernity for the individual sense of self. As tradition loses its grip on social life, individual self becomes increasingly reflexive. People make more conscious choices about who they are and what they wish to become. They do not simply accept their position in society and their sense of self that comes from socialization. However, individuals face problems in developing their sense of self in a reflexive way but within a moral vacuum. Religion and spirituality steps in to fill that vacuum. As such, there is a revival of religious beliefs and practices. Bauman (1998) while commenting on post-modernity and religion holds that post-modernity tears down or deconstruct any claims for universal truth. It rejects the belief that there can be a rational basis of perfecting society. This uncertainty raises problems with morality and ethics. Religion steps in to reinforce personal morality and ethics. As such, there is a revival of religious and quasi-religious movements.

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3. Critical Analysis of Theories of Religion & Some Observations

Many evidences support Marx's view on religion. In the shanty towns in many South American countries, Pentecostalism is growing rapidly in popularity. Politicians and capitalists often tell their poverty-stricken followers that their poverty results from their sins. Religion has also legitimated power and privilege. The caste system of traditional India is justified by Hindu religious beliefs. In medieval Europe, kings ruled by divine right. But there are also evidences that contradict Marxian theory. In many socialist countries and in the socialist Israeli kibbutzim, religion has not withered away. In fact, religious beliefs are as fervent here as in any other societies.

However, some scholars believe that belief in God has no class basis. The rich worship as much as the poor and, sometimes, even harder and more passionately. No matter to which social strata we belong to, we all worship because we all need God's help and benediction to deal with the same issues of uncertainties in life, to deal with our fears and misgivings and to deal with some of the harshest realities of life especially the death of near and dear ones with fortitude and equanimity. And, here, they agree with Malinowski (1954) that religion helps individuals to cope with emotional stress and tension. Max Weber (1958/1963) would make us believe that Hinduism is not conducive to the growth of capitalism. Hinduism concentrates only on other worldly pursuits but this is not the case. The philosophy of artha i.e. of making money and aspiring for worldly prosperity and of Kama i.e. of pleasure including sensuous pleasure also form important pillars of Hindu philosophy. Singer (1972) in his study of businessmen in Madras has shown it quite exquisitely how traditional Hindu values such as joint family ethic has helped in the growth of capitalism in Madras (Chennai). The functionalist theories have also been criticized on certain counts. Merton (1968) highlights the dysfunctional aspect of religion in a multi-religious society. Religious fundamentalism and fanaticism leads to inter-religious conflicts and hostility. This greatly threatens social stability and integration.

In recent years, the world has seen the proliferation of sects and cults. A sect is a small religious group whose members are mainly drawn from the lower class. Sects reject the norms and values of the society and replace them with their own beliefs and practices. Peter Berger (1967) says – "sects are in tension with the larger society." [cited in Heald 1980: 468]. Max Weber (1963) says sects arise mainly among marginal groups of the society. They feel relatively deprived with respect to economic rewards and social honor. A solution to this problem lies in a sect based on what Weber calls "theodicy of disprivilege". Such sects contain an explanation of the disprivilege and promise a better life in the future "new world".

A great debate also exists as to the future and function of religion in modern industrial societies. Bryan Wilson (1966) believes that under the impact of secularization, many of the earlier functions of religion have declined. No doubt, science has experienced several religious myths. Despite this, religion does exist and many of its functions are still evident. Further, religion has now become a more privatized affair. In the present era of intense stress and strain, religion acts as a great tool for easing and comforting individuals.

In recent years, the whole discourse on religion has become predominantly social and the psychological aspect of religion has been relegated to the background. As a consequence of the surge in religious fundamentalism and especially after the horrific 9/11 incident, religious discourses have taken up completely new dimensions. But it must be reemphasized that the psychological importance of religion as its ability to enable human beings to cope with stress and strain is remarkable.

As an instrument of social reality, religion has always been so since antiquity. But social identity is a relational term. Only when we are interacting with others does our social identity of religion, caste, class or region comes into operation. When such interaction is with people with whom we share the same religion, it leads to what Durkheim (1984) would call social solidarity. When such interaction is with others, it might lead to tension or friction – what Merton would call the dysfunctional aspect of religion.

But it cannot be denied that religion evokes the most fervent and passionate identity in us. History is replete with facts when religious passions were ignited to wage wars or oppress others. Christ was crucified because his teachings were considered heresy; Babur won all his battles in India by stirring the religious passions of his soldiers; and Europe launched a crusade against the Muslims as they thought that their religion was in danger. History is so full of religious sentiments being used for ulterior motives and mindless violence that any reference to one's religious identity in today's modern society is seen as being parochial and primordial and often draws sharp reactions.

One book that has, of late, intensely fuelled the debate in academia on inter-religious interactions or rather clashes is "The Clash of Civilization and the Remaking of The World Order" by Samuel P Huntington (1996). The ghastly terror attacks across the world, beginning with the 9/11 incident that shook the whole world, have led scholars especially in the west to sit up and take note of this work. Nobody can condone or take a soft stand on fundamentalism belonging to any religion. Terrorism emanating from religious revivalism or fundamentalism is the greatest threat the world faces today and it must be dealt with an iron hand. But the international community must also address those issues that create disaffection among the youth and force them towards mindless violence.

Huntington's paper came in reaction to Fukuyama's (1992) thesis that after the Soviet disintegration, the ideological war is over. Communism as an ideology has lost and gradually the western liberal democracy would become the dominant political dispensation in all societies. Huntington's said that Soviet breakdown has not brought an end to conflict – whether real or ideological. He propounded his theory that the 21st century would be characterized by intense conflict among civilizations based on religious and cultural identities. He divided the world into major civilizations like Western-Christian, Islamic, Hindu, Jews, Buddhist etc. Among all these conflicts, that between the Western-Christian civilization and Islamic civilization would be the most intense one.

The terror attack on U.S on 9/11 reinforced the belief in Huntington's theory. Warmongers and hawks used Huntington's theory to further their own vested interests while others immediately got into the act of disproving his theory to prevent the world from another spell of mindless violence. Sen (2006) makes a scathing critique of Huntington's proposition. Sen asserts that a person's identity is multifaceted. Religion is only one dimension of that identity. Region, caste, class and language are other dimensions of identity for the same individual. A man's identity is fluid and he keeps on shuttling between all these identities. Huntington's work is deterministic as it fixes an individual's identity only to religion and then builds up the theory.

4. Conclusion

India, too, has witnessed many incidences of communal violence since independence beginning with Partition. Chandra (2000) who has made extensive research on communalism in India says that religious conflicts always have political and social reasons at their roots. When religious passions are being fanned by unscrupulous politicians for petty political gains, it often leads to conflicts and tensions. Also, in our country where resources are scarce and population huge, it has become extremely difficult to meet the needs of everybody. The disgruntled and disaffected people especially the youth often fall easy prey to communal fervor where other religions are projected as being responsible for their sufferings and deprivations. Chandra holds that the real thing we have to fight against is communal ideology. Riots are just an outward manifestation of this ideology.

To conclude, any expression and articulation of one's religious feelings and beliefs is not always parochial. A deeply religious man knows that all religions preach the same gospels of tolerance, love and brotherhood. Gandhi was a devout Hindu who often invoked the name of Rama and quoted the teachings of Gita to lend credence to his actions. But Gandhi was not anti-secular. In fact, he was one of the most secular persons to have ever walked the planet earth.

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