

## Lecture Summary:

To start the class: ask students to recall what it means to use the sociological perspective. Have a student define it for the class. Then ask students, "using your sociological perspective, what do you think are topics that a sociologist might study if they want to learn about religion?" (record on chalkboard)

Important topics (make sure that these come up in discussion):

- religious practices
- the history of religion around the world
- the sociopolitical development of religion
- the role of religion in society
- universal themes across religions
- the social structure of religion

Note that in the sociology of religion there is particular emphasis on the recurring role of religion in nearly every society that has existed since recorded history began. Also that sociologists are interested in the effects that religion has on society, but also the effects that society has on religion.

Now ask students to define the term "religion." (record ideas on chalkboard)

According to Durkheim (1912), "A religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden- beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them."

Ask students: what type of sociological perspective do we associate with Durkheim? (functionalist) Ask students: how is this definition functionalist? (it explains the purpose of religion by what it does in social life- unifies societies) Ask students: how close did we get to Durkheim's definition as a class?

The overall idea is that, according to Durkheim, we need religion to bring people together and to help get them to work together toward a common purpose; in other words, people need to be integrated into society. Social cohesion often occurs through the creation of shared symbols or a common value system.

Ask students: what are some non-religious symbols that we use in the U.S. to create social cohesion? What are some symbols that certain religions use to create social cohesion?

Religion is good at creating this cohesion because it provides people with things like: common values (ask students for examples), common experiences (ask students for examples) and common interpretations (ask students for examples).

According to Durkheim, in early societies, religion was especially important because it was the only institution that could perform these roles- formal governments did not usually exist.

Now ask students to think about another prominent theorist they've been introduced to: Marx. Ask students: what do you think Marx would have to say about religion. Guide the discussion toward his interpretation of religion as ideology.

Marx thought that religion was ideology- which is common to all sociologists. According to Marx, however, we need to analyze the ways that religion related to the forces of exploitation in the Capitalist system. Ask students: use your conflict perspective- how could religion help Capitalism to flourish?

Possibilities:

- religion makes people feel better, and blinds them to the true nature of their situation
- religion provides justifications for being poor in this life- the Bible says that the kingdom of heaven belongs to the poor

This is why Marx (1977) said: "Religion is the opium of the masses." (discuss with students)

A good current sociological definition of religion is (Giddens 2006): a cultural system of commonly shared beliefs and rituals that provide a sense of ultimate meaning and purpose by creating an idea of reality that is sacred, all-encompassing, and supernatural.

Key elements:

1. Religion is a form of culture- shares all characteristics of culture such as shared beliefs, values that create an identity
2. Religion involves beliefs that take the form of ritualized practices- all members engage in behaviors that identify them as members of the community
3. Religion provides a sense of purpose- feeling that life is ultimately meaningful

Ask students to name some types of religious bodies that they can think of (record on chalkboard).

In sociology, there are four typologies that are usually used to describe religious bodies: ecclesiae, denominations, cults, and sects.

**Ecclesia/Church:** a church is considered to be a large and all-encompassing religious body that tolerates no religious competition. They are often highly connected to the economic market and political system of a society. Ask students for an example (the Roman Catholic church in the middle ages). An ecclesia is similar to a church, except that they are not quite as good at encouraging the all-encompassing worldview among their members. Example? (state churches in some European countries)

**Denomination:** denominations exist in societies where churches do not hold a religious monopoly- they are one religion among many. Denominations tend to be considered

legitimate and may attempt to influence state policy. They are also usually at least tolerant of religious pluralism in the society in which they are situated, and they train and employ professional clergy. Example? (the Methodist Church)

Sect: a new religious group that forms to protest elements of a parent religion. Most commonly, sects form when a group of members become concerned with what they perceive to be liberal trends within a religious organization. Most denominations in the U.S. today originally were sects that broke away. Interestingly, leaders of sects often come from lower socio-economic classes than the average member of the parent religion. Ask students: why might that be the case? Example of a sect?

Cults: new religious groups that can form without breaking away from a parent religion-but also can be like sects in that way. The most important distinction of a cult is that the group advocates for belief in something new or something that has been lost or forgotten (new prophecies, lost scripture). Cults are also likely to be led by a charismatic leader (example: John Smith beginning Mormonism with the Book of Mormon). Tendencies of cults include (keep in mind that these are tendencies; there are always counter-examples): emphasis on esoteric ideologies; membership by the socially disenchanted; dissipation after the death/discrediting of the charismatic leader. Ask students for an example of a cult (the People's Temple).

At this point, introduce the activity.