

*Sociology of Religion*

**Regis University MAP690F**

**From: Sandra Enders**

**To: Richard Williams**

**Abstract**

This course, while assuming some knowledge of the workings of society and basic terminology of sociology, will introduce the graduate student to the nature and functions of religious beliefs and institutions in modern societies. A sociological perspective will be maintained in order to evaluate and analyze different theories of religion as it is embedded in, and related to, other aspects of social and cultural systems. The course will first look at the recent trend of studying religion as a specialization of sociology and attempt to define the discipline itself. It will then attempt to decipher the classic writings of early theorists of religion in society specifically, Marx, Durkheim, and Weber. Two modern day schools of thought will also be reviewed, Secularization theory and the Rational Choice theory, along with current day theorists. Distinctions to the organizational structure of religion will be looked at along with basic differences and similarities between the major religions of the world, as well as current trends such as evangelicalism, fundamentalism, and the New Age movement.

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## **Sociology of Religion**

It is not a surprise that the discipline that evolved out of the Enlightenment period and took off on a rationalists and positivists tone, namely sociology, might have shunned the study of one of society's most important institutions, namely religion. Although the founding fathers of sociology, Marx, Durkheim, and Weber, did write extensively on the topic, it generally lost favor in sociology studies with the rise of secularism throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Sociology had strived for so long, to be considered a positive science, it was no wonder that the study of religion was often avoided, with the focus remaining on more traditional sociological topics. The prediction of early sociologists, including Marx and Weber, of religion taking a back seat to science and eventual secularization of society has since then become greatly disproved. With the realigned geopolitical boundaries of the new millennium, the rise of Islam and Christianity throughout the world, and a steady development and attendance of various religious denominations in America, it seems that the practice of religion in the global society is not only alive, but thriving. Over the past few decades it has moved out of the disciplines of religion and theology and is being studied more and more as a specialized subsection of sociology. The study of religion and society is important because it not only helps to explain institutional practices and rituals, but also social attitudes and behavior. Although religious rites and traditions are often divinely inspired, the institution itself is a social process and observable for empirical research. The study of religion from a sociological perspective strives to understand the role of worship in daily life and culture, and its content still may encompass, although not focus exclusively on, other traditional topics of sociological inquiry such as inequality, gender, race, class issues, the life cycle and even politics and economics. It attempts to explain effects that religion has on society while also looking at the affect of society on religion.

### ***Foundation and Organization of Religion***

Archaeological evidence suggests that religious beliefs have been identified in human communal living situations as far as can be found. They are generally shared by the community and express the communal culture and values through myth, doctrine, and ritual. Sociologists and anthropologists see religion as an abstract set of ideas, values, or experiences developed as part of a cultural mix. It is often found that a presence of a belief in the sacred or supernatural is included in the cultural mix. Worship is often the most basic element of religion, but moral conduct, religious rites participation, and social involvement and belonging, also constitute elements of the religious life. Religion often attempts to answer basic questions intrinsic to the human condition concerning human suffering or illness, evil versus good, right versus wrong, and often concerning death and the after life.

The interpretations of the supernatural meaning, identity, and form, are as numerous as there are religions in the world. However there are basic consistencies or foundations of the divine or supernatural which are often encountered in religion. *Animism* is probably one of the oldest forms of divine belief and traditionally associated with small scale more primitive societies, although it can still be found in some of the major world religions today. It is a Latin word meaning *the breath of life*. It does not accept the separation of body and soul, of spirit from matter. It believes in the existence of spirits in the natural world as having conscience life form separate from the human form. Many Native American societies maintained this belief, which explains for their reverence for their natural environment. British anthropologist Sir Edward Burnett Tylor studied this form of belief extensively coining the term in his *Primitive Culture* (1871).

*Polytheism* is also an ancient form of worship, which offers a belief system in many gods. Although today, *monotheism*, meaning to worship only one god, is more popular, throughout history polytheism often dominated religious thought. In polytheistic religions, the gods were usually organized in a hierarchy with some dominating others as having differing and more or less power. They often originated as abstractions of the forces of nature such as the sky or the sea, or of human and social functions such as love, war, marriage, or the arts. In many polytheistic religions the sky god is associated with power and knowledge, and the earth goddess with a maternal representation which was associated with fertility. Gods of good or benevolent forces often clashed with gods of evil or malevolent forces.

Judaism was one of the first known monotheistic religions, which arose from the Hebrew people in the Middle East approximately four thousand years prior to the entrance of Christianity with the birth of Jesus Christ, a Jewish prophet himself, who broke from Jewish tradition. Mohammed, an Islamic prophet, arose in the 5<sup>th</sup> century, also out of the Middle East and from Hebrew descendents of Abraham, claiming Allah as his one god. Today the three religions, which are all monotheistic, account for over half of the world.

Although *dualism* is common in philosophical systems, usually in metaphysics or epistemology, it is not very common in divine religious worship. It means to believe in two opposing forces. In a religious sense, good would oppose evil. Zoroastrianism, which was founded in the 6<sup>th</sup> century in the area of today's Iran, is one of the few dualistic religions in the world. Its prophet, Zoroaster, was a reformer of the tribal polytheism of that time.

*Pantheism* is the belief that the universe is God and, conversely, that there is no god apart from the substance, forces, and laws manifested in the universe. It denies that God is of any distinct personality, has any plan for the world, nor does it offer any moral teaching to guide mankind. Pantheism characterizes many Buddhist and Hindu doctrines. Many early Greek philosophers contributed to the foundations of Western pantheism, which continued through the Middle Ages and Renaissance. The tradition was continued in Neoplatonism and Judeo-Christian mysticism. In the 17th century Benedict de Spinoza formulated the most pantheistic philosophical system, arguing that God and Nature are merely two names for one reality.

An *established church or religion* means it is formally sanctioned and financially supported by the government of a country. Examples are the Anglican Church of England, and Islam in Pakistan and Iran. Religious tolerance will vary in countries with established religions.

A *denomination* in contrast, is a church independent of the state. America offers such a separation of religion and government and recognizes religious pluralism. Members of denominations hold to their own beliefs but respects other doctrines. Church denominations for the most part try to fit into the larger society.

A *sect*, on the other hand holds stricter religious convictions with less tolerance of others beliefs, than denominations do. They tend to stand apart from the larger of society, often in isolation. They maintain less formality and organization and are often in a more personal relationship with their god. They are often breakaway groups from other established churches who have become disenfranchised with their church. Many sect groups which form, eventually fade away. The Amish in America are an example of a sect religious group.

*Cults* most often develop completely outside of society. Many cultish practices and principles are considered unconventional and are often labeled deviant or even evil. They are generally more radical in doctrine, and much lower in tolerance of others beliefs, than sects are. They are often led by charismatic leadership, who prey upon social outcasts and the disadvantaged in society, sometimes using extreme methods to control members. Because of negative publicity of a few mass suicide attempts through the years, cults are often thought of in a negative light, but many are harmless and just choose to stay secluded from society.

*Civil religion* is a set of quasi-religious attitudes, beliefs, rituals, and symbols based on citizenship which ties members of a political community together. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, the 18<sup>th</sup> century philosopher, first referred to the concept as virtues that citizens need to serve the state. The concept was later elaborated by the American sociologist Robert N. Bellah, who is discussed later in more detail. American rituals concerning patriotism, such as flag display and singing the national anthem at public events are examples.

Religious *fundamentalism* is an extremely conservative view which understands religious thought and practice through literal interpretation of sacred texts such as the Bible or the Quran. This concept became more popular during the 20<sup>th</sup> century in reaction to modernism and fear of secularization in society. It is most often found in Islamic and Protestant Christian groups which stress the infallibility of the sacred texts in matters of faith, morals, and as historical record. *Evangelicalism* closely overlaps with Christian fundamentalist thought, but also stresses conversion of others into the faith. The word comes from the Greek word for *Gospel* or *good news*.



### ***Major Religions of the World***

One of the three great monotheistic world religions, ***Judaism*** began as the faith of the ancient Hebrews. Fundamental to Judaism is the worship of Yahweh (God) and belief that the people of Israel are God's chosen people. God made a covenant first with Abraham, then renewed it with Isaac, Jacob, and Moses. The *Torah* is the book of Jewish religious teachings which is the first five sections (Book of Moses) of the Old Testament of the Christian bible. The body of oral law and commentaries were written in the *Talmud* and *Mishna*. The religion persevered despite severe persecutions throughout history. By the end of the 19th century Zionism, a Jewish nationalism movement with a goal of establishing a Jewish state in Palestine had appeared as an outgrowth of reform which led to declaration of the State of Israel in 1948. Today Judaism is basically divided into the Orthodox who maintains the old traditions and the modernized groups such as the Conservative, Liberal, and Reform.

***Christianity*** stemmed from the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ or Messiah, foretold in the early Jewish scriptures. The religion started in the 1<sup>st</sup> century soon after his crucifixion in 30ad. Their sacred scripture is the Bible, particularly the New Testament. Its doctrine states that Jesus is the Son of God (the second person of the Holy Trinity), that God's love for the world is the essential component of his being, and that Jesus died to redeem humankind. Nearly all Christian churches have an ordained clergy, members of which are typically, though not always, male. Members of the clergy lead group worship services and are viewed as intermediaries between the laity and the divine in some churches. Christianity has splintered over the centuries into many denominations and sects which vary widely in doctrine and practice. The major divisions are Roman Catholicism, Eastern Orthodoxy, and Protestantism.

*Islam* also splintered out of Judaism through the teachings of the Hebrew prophet, Abraham and also through the Hebrew bloodline, being Ishmael, son to Abraham and Hagar. Its founder Muhammad lived in Arabia in the early 7th century AD. Islam, also a monotheistic religion, regards their founder the last of God's messengers, after Adam, Abraham, Moses, Jesus, and others. Allah is the God of Islam and the sacred scripture, which contains God's revelations to Muhammad, is the Quran. The religious obligations of all Muslims are in the Five Pillars of Islam, which include belief in God and his Prophet and obligations of prayer, charity, pilgrimage, and fasting. Observant Muslims pray five times a day and join in community worship on Fridays at a mosque, where worship is led by an imam. Divisions brought about by disputes over the succession to the caliphate, those who succeed Muhammad, split into the Sunni sect and the Shiite sect. The Sunni sect, which is the large majority of Islam with 90%, believes in separation of church and state, the Shiite sect does not.

*Confucianism* is more of a philosophical system rather than an organized religion. It originally developed in China in the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC from the teachings of Confucius. It is a complex system of moral, social, political, and religious thought which has had tremendous influence on the history of China. Confucianism stresses harmonious balance in life with the dynamic interaction of *yin* (female) and *yang* (male). It was the official religion of China until the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century and has also impacted other parts of Asia as well. The core idea is humanism with an emphasis on discipline and respect for authority

*Chinese Folk* is composed of a combination of Eastern religions such as Confucianism, Buddhism, Taoism, ancestor worship, and even has traces of neolithic belief systems which include the worship of and communication with animals and celestial bodies.

**Buddhism** was founded by Siddhartha Gautama in India 2500 years ago. Its teachings are based on its founder's enlightenment, which was realized out of his many travels. Its doctrine center is concerned with human suffering which is included in the *four noble truths*. All people suffer to varying degrees. Attachment and desire are the roots of suffering. Suffering can be overcome if one lets go of attachment and desire. The desired state of *nirvana* can be achieved by following the *eight fold path*, which involves an ethical life, meditation, and the renouncing of material pleasures. It is similar to Confucianism in that it focuses on a moral and ethical philosophy more than ritualistic religious doctrine. Because of this it is often practiced along with other religions such as Taoism and Confucianism. Today most of its population is scattered throughout India and Asia.

**Hinduism** is the oldest of today's major religions which began in India about 4500 years ago. It evolved out of the ancient Vedic religion of India and was the source of later Buddhism and Sikhism. It maintains no central sacred writings or buildings of worship and although it is a polytheistic system of worship its focus is on the individual and their spiritual progress of the soul. All creatures go through a cycle of rebirth, or *samsara*, which can only be broken by spiritual self-realization, after which liberation, or *moksha*, is attained. One's *karma*, or soul works through reincarnation at a new spiritual level after each death and rebirth. Hinduism was the basis for the social structure, or *caste* system that persisted in India for centuries with only recently getting legal abolishment. The numerous Hindu gods are mostly viewed as incarnations or epiphanies of the main deities, though some are survivors of the pre-Aryan era.

Information found in pages 4-11 of this paper were taken from sources below:

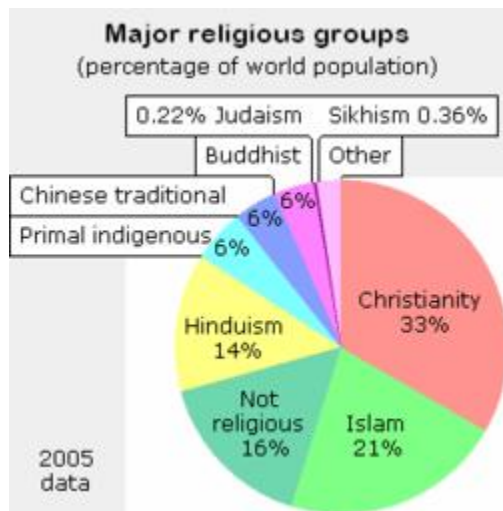
*Sociology*, Gelles and Levine,

*Society*, Macionis

*International Dictionary of Religion*, Kennedy

*Britannica Desktop Encyclopedia* (2006)

*Wikipedia* Free Encyclopedia {<http://en.wikipedia.org>}



{[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Organized\\_religion](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Organized_religion)} 02.27.07

### *Religious symbols*



Row 1 Christian, Jewish, Hindu

Row 2 Islamic, Buddhist, Shinto

Row 3 Sikh, Baha'i, Jain

{[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Organized\\_religion](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Organized_religion)} 02.27.07

**Basic information on various religions:**

Religion	Date Founded	Sacred Texts	Membership <sup>5</sup>	% of World <sup>6</sup>
<a href="#">Christianity</a>	30 <a href="#">CE</a>	The Bible	2,039 million	32% (dropping)
<a href="#">Islam</a>	622 CE	Qur'an & Hadith	1,226 million	19% (growing)
<a href="#">Hinduism</a>	1,500 <a href="#">BCE</a> with truly ancient roots	Bhagavad-Gita, Upanishads, & Rig Veda	828 million	13% (stable)
No religion (Note 1)	-	None	775 million	12% (dropping)
Chinese folk rel.	270 BCE	None	390 million	6%
<a href="#">Buddhism</a>	523 BCE	The Tripitaka & Sutras	364 million	6% (stable)
Tribal Religions, Shamanism, Animism	Prehistory	Oral tradition	232 million	4%
<a href="#">Atheists</a>	No date	None	150 million	2%
New religions.	Various	Various	103 million	2%
<a href="#">Sikhism</a>	1500 CE	Guru Granth Sahib	23.8 million	<1%
<a href="#">Judaism</a>	Note 3	Torah, Tanach, & Talmud	14.5 million	<1%
Spiritism			12.6 million	<1%
<a href="#">Baha'i Faith</a>	1863 CE	Alkitab Alaqdas	7.4 million	<1%
<a href="#">Confucianism</a>	520 BCE	Lun Yu	6.3 million	<1%
<a href="#">Jainism</a>	570 BCE	Siddhanta, Pakrit	4.3 million	<1%
<a href="#">Zoroastrianism</a>	600 to 6000 BCE	Avesta	2.7 million	<1%
<a href="#">Shinto</a>	500 CE	Kojiki, Nohon Shoki	2.7 million	<1%
<a href="#">Taoism</a>	550 BCE	Tao-te-Ching	2.7 million	<1%
Other	Various	Various	1.1 million	<1%
<a href="#">Wicca</a>	800 BCE, 1940 CE	None	0.5 million?	<1%

{ [www.religioustolerance.org/worldrel.htm](http://www.religioustolerance.org/worldrel.htm) } 03.01.07

***Marx on Religion***

In his earlier writings, in the summer of 1843, Karl Marx (1818-1883) wrote about his views on religion in his *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*. Marx strongly felt that humans should be guided by applied science, facts, and the use of reason. Religion, he felt went against this concept with the use of faith and belief, which only masked the truth while misguiding the person. Marx's view of man's labor in modernity stripped the individual of dignity and self worth by the division of labor. This division caused a separation of human labor and the fruits or results of that labor, resulted in dehumanization, which in turn led to internal alienation of the person within. The worth of a person became nothing more than the price of a commodity. This alienation, Marx argued, was at the center of social inequality in society. His antithesis to this alienation was freedom. The purpose of religion was only to give an illusion and promise of a better life where realistically there was little hope for one. Therefore religion served only to uphold the ideologies and cultural systems that fostered the capitalist economy, and give a false sense of help and salvation.

*“Man, who has found in the fantastic reality of heaven, where he sought a supernatural being, only his reflection, will no longer be tempted to find only the semblance of himself – a non-human being – where he seeks and must seek his true reality.....Religion is a sigh of the oppressed creature, the sentiment of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people..... The abolition of religion as the illusionary happiness of men, is a demand for their real happiness. (Marx/Tucker, 1843/1978, p. 53-54)*

Religion, Marx argued, served only the ruling class elite by diverting the masses attention off of their own exploitation and situation of inequality. He viewed God as being created in mans own image and in mans perception of what God should be. His critique of religion was a call to people to abandon their illusions and philosophy, he argued, had a critical role to play in exposing these illusions. The only next step he saw was to acknowledge that there was no real God only nature and humanity. This acceptance would encourage the individual to focus on their own personal development rather than look to a God for help, and then philosophy should establish that ideal of human fulfillment. In turn a classless society, which he predicted would happen through revolution, would arise, and religion would become irrelevant and unnecessary.

This Marxist thought on religion was a major factor in what led to the move toward secularism worldwide. In America, it culminated with the 1960's cultural declaration, God is dead, as this was an era of liberal Marxist influence on intellectual centers across the country.

Although Marx did not talk about gender inequality, many conflict theorists today feel that is another common way that inequality is encouraged through a patriarchal religious system, as many traditional religions, including Islam, Christianity, and Judaism, often favor this type of thinking in their doctrine.

One major critique of Marx and conflict theory and its position on institutionalized religion in society is that often in periods of positive change, concerning increased equality, organized religion often plays major roles in mobilization of the masses, and in getting heard in government. For instance both the abolition of slavery in America during the later part of 19<sup>th</sup> century and the civil rights movement in the later part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was heavily influenced by organized religion which aided the people in getting their voice heard.

***Durkheim on Religion***

Emile Durkheim (1858-1917) was also a man of science and reason, as Marx was. However, he held a much different perspective on religion. He was very much a believer in institutional structure in society as being a positive necessary force which leads to solidarity and camaraderie. He felt that religion aided the people and offered much needed cohesion which creates unification. Durkheim's work was one of the first to use the positivism of Comte and put it to work in a formal scientific method of study. Durkheim's work was based more on empirical observation than Marx's theory and developed decades later. He held to the notion that religion was an important function because it encouraged a collective thinking of which the interest of society should come before the interest of the individual. The move from the collective traditional society to the modern society was a concern to him, feeling that capitalism would eventually undermine religion, as Marx had predicted.

Comte had viewed the need and possibilities of integration and interaction during tumultuous times in society with social progress, being man's humanity over animality and altruism over egoism. (Peterson, 1987, p. 113). He was a true humanist leaving his old God of theology for humanity. However, for Durkheim, the social cohesion which religion offered was of more importance than humanism itself. Where Comte placed humanity above all else, Durkheim placed society itself at the top. He viewed the ideal model of the relationship between man and God as closely resembling the relationship between man and society. Religion was created by society in its own image. There were no false religions, all being true. Some may be superior to others but only in the sense of bringing higher mental faculties into play, proportionately richer in ideas and feelings, more complex, or elaborately systemized. However, no matter how complex they were all equally religious and thus demanded equal respect.



Striving to understand the basic forms of religious life, Durkheim traveled to Australia, where he performed an ethnographic study for fifteen years among the Australian aborigines, who he considered to be the most primitive in relation to the rest of the world. He reported his findings in his last major written work called *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1912) which still remains a classic in the study of religion in society. In it he argued that the totemic gods that the aborigines worshiped were actually expressions of their own perception of what society was. He felt that this was true for all religions and felt that people perceived society as a greater force than themselves and then associated a supernatural face to it in the form of religion. It is an expression of our collective unconscious, which amounts to all other individual consciences fused together. The rites, traditions, and symbolisms used in religious practice give the entity that much more power. The complexity of the society in turn determines the complexity of the religious system which develops, and the more societies mix with other societies, the more that universal concepts get emphasized.

In chapter one of book I of his *elementary forms* writing, Durkheim defines religion as being 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 to adhere to them*”. This definition clearly places people in control, setting the moral conduct and creating the collective community, deciding on the sacredness of the objects, and organizing it into a unified system. The sacredness exists in the real world and its creation, and individual as well as collective participation, is observable and testable. Durkheim held that religion was a fundamental and permanent aspect of humanity, though gods were not fundamental and permanent aspects of religion.

Durkheim held that religious phenomena fell into two basic categories, beliefs and rites. The former are states of opinion, the later are modes of action, and all in between separates thinking from doing. Rites, he distinguishes from other moral practices---only by the special nature of their object. The object of the rite must be characterized in order to characterize the rite itself and the special nature of the object is expressed in the belief. Thus, only after defining the belief can we define the rite. (Durkheim, 1912, p.34)

All known religious beliefs display a common feature which are represented in two distinct categories of reference which Durkheim elaborated on were the difference between the *sacred* and the *profane* phenomena in society. The sacred was that which might be considered holy, supernatural, having a metaphysical connection, or a divine nature. For instance in Christianity, a cross would be a sacred concept. The profane were the items of everyday and universal use from one society to another, anything which is not sacred. Through his elementary forms writing he focuses on the sacred and only mentions the profane as opposing the sacred. He holds that religious phenomena emerges in society when a separation is made between the sphere of the profane of everyday activities and the sphere of the sacred, the transcendental.

An object is intrinsically neither sacred nor profane, as it becomes one or the other depending on whether man chooses to consider the utilitarian value of the object or a divine attribute which offers nothing to do with its instrumental value. An item can transcend from profane to sacred. This is called *transformation* or *totius substantiae*. Thus religion rises from our experiences of society and designates this experience to having expression and concrete form. Religion creates moral communities and rituals bolster solidarity by reaffirming common bonds. It encourages a feeling of belonging and in turn offers collective support and help with adjusting to loss, pain, illness, and bereavement. (Durkheim, 1912, p.36-7)

By understanding the importance and power of the social institutions, Durkheim took Comte's work to a much higher level as one of the first structural functionalists using the concept of solidarity and humanism to create cohesion and stability, stressing social order over action and conflict. However, he was also one of the first to work Comte's positivism as a source for social understanding, finding social problems, and filling social needs. A primary assumption of the functionalist perspective is that society naturally acts as a stable, self-regulating, although very complex, system which sustains itself because its institutions serve peoples basic needs. Its parts work together to promote stability and solidarity. Durkheim categorized religion into three major functions of society:

- as a controlling disciplinary force to promote conformity and discipline noncompliance
- as a bonding and cohesive force to unify people through shared symbolism, values, norms, morality, ritual worship, rules
- to provide meaning and purpose, boost moral of people, offer a feeling of well being, euphoria, happiness, confidence, especially through hard times

(Macionis, 2002, p. 355-6)

One criticism of Durkheim's structural functional approach to religion is that only the proper functioning process of religion is stressed and the dysfunctional areas are avoided. For instance much social conflict and many wars have been fought and continue to be fought in the name of a God or a specific religions belief.

### ***Weber on Religion***

Unlike Marx, who characterized religion as offering false hope to the disenfranchised or Durkheim who viewed religion as a necessary cohesion in society, Max Weber (1864-1920) focused his work on the interaction of culture and religion in relation to the economic system of a society. He, as were Marx and Durkheim, was perplexed with the rise of capitalism, which originated out of Britain, and the change in society in response to it. He studied and wrote much on the history of economics in his early years. Whereas Marx felt that religion was an obstacle to social change, Weber held that it was an agent of social change. He was not a strict positivist, as Durkheim was so he was not as concerned with direct causal links as he was with cultural influence on the individual's rational choice. He felt that religion often shaped a person's image of the world and focused his study on historical factors which led to social action surrounding religion and economics. Although Marx and Durkheim did address the issue of religion in society, Weber took the study much deeper creating his own discipline, along with Ernst Troeltsch (1865-1923) and Werner Sombart (1863-1941), with the sociology of religion, which Weber coined *religionssoziologie*. (Weber, 1922, p. XX)

Weber's first and most known work on religion was his *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1904-5). In it he argued that capitalism was the social counterpart of Calvinistic theology. He then moved onto other areas of the world with *The Religion of China: Confucianism and Taoism*, *The Religion of India: The Sociology of Hinduism and Buddhism*, and *Ancient Judaism*. His goal was to find reason for different political and economic developmental paths in geographic areas within the religions of the societies. Main themes of study were based on the form of economy which developed in the specific area, the social stratification of the area, and finding distinguishing characteristics unique to Western civilization.

Weber began his work by observing in countries with both Protestant and Catholic populations, that the more financially successful people, leaders, business owners, highly skilled workers, etc, were overwhelmingly Protestant. With this observation he formed his thesis that Calvinist ethic and ideas influenced the development of capitalism. This theory is sometimes viewed as a reversal of Marx's thesis that the economic base of society determines all other aspects of it. He defines the *spirit of capitalism* as the *ideas and habits that favour the rational pursuit of economic gain*. Weber held that certain types of Protestantism, specifically Calvinism, favored the rational pursuit of economic gain and worldly activities which was given positive spiritual and moral meaning in the religion. This meaning was taken indirectly from the doctrine of predestination which stated that God decided before a person was born whether that person would end up in heaven or hell and no matter what good works that person performed they could not alter that predetermination. This created anxiety in the individual which Calvinists resolved by regarding worldly achievement as a sign of God's favor. Unlike Catholics who were promised a route to salvation and a place in heaven through sacramental participation and condemnation of the pursuit of profits especially through commerce, trade, and lending, Calvinist's considered investing, and profit making a moral duty. Calvinism gave capitalism moral sanction creating many dedicated entrepreneurs, which he called *heroic entrepreneurs*. In his conclusion Weber describes the spirit of capitalism and the rationalization of scientific pursuit in modern times as an *iron cage* in which the technical and economic conditions of machine production determine the lives of the individual. For Weber, a society in which human activities and relations are governed by rational calculation and economic compulsions was devoid of meaning. (Gelles & Levine, 1999, p. 490)

*The Puritan wanted to work in a calling; we are forced to do so. For when asceticism was carried out of monastic cells into everyday life, and began to dominate worldly morality, it did its part in building the tremendous cosmos of the modern economic order. This order is now bound to the technical and economic conditions of machine production which to-day determine the lives of all the individuals who are born into this mechanism, not only those directly concerned with economic acquisition, with irresistible force. Perhaps it will so determine them until the last ton of fossilized coal is burnt. In Baxter's view the care for external goods should only lie on the shoulders of the "saint like a light cloak, which can be thrown aside at any moment". But fate decreed that the cloak should become an iron cage. (Weber, 1904, p. 181)*

In his work on China, Weber specifically looked at Confucianism and Taoism asking the reversed question why did capitalism not develop in China. He concluded that Confucianism and Puritanism both represented two comprehensive types of rationalisation, both attempting to live by certain ultimate religious beliefs which encouraged sobriety, self-discipline, and accumulation of wealth. However, Confucianism aimed at attaining and preserving their culture while stressing education, self-perfection, politeness and family piety; while Puritanism used those means in order to create a tool of God, creating a person that would serve the God and master the world. Such thinking was incompatible with the aesthetic values of Confucianism. Therefore, Weber states that it was the difference in prevailing mentality that contributed to the development of capitalism in the West and the absence of it in China. (www.Wikipedia.com)

The study of the religions of India was Weber's third major work on religion. In this he focused on the caste structure and the segregation in Indian society, which he directly linked to religious belief. He describes the caste system, consisting of the Brahmins (priests), the Kshatriyas (warriors), the Vaisyas (merchants) and the Shudras (labourers). Then he moves on to the reasons it developed. He looked at Hindu religious beliefs asking the question whether religion had any influence upon the daily activities, and if so, how it impacted economic conduct. He held that the idea of reincarnation and the caste system, which is supported by the religion, slowed economic development, with the system heavily weighted against any development of capitalism. He concluded his study in India by combining his findings with his previous work on China and found that the social world was fundamentally divided between the educated, whose lives were oriented toward the exemplary conduct of a prophet or wise man, and the uneducated masses who remained caught in their daily rounds and believed in magic. In Asia, no Messianic prophet appeared that gave meaning to the everyday life. He argued that it was the Messianic prophets in the countries of the Near East, as distinguished from the prophecy of the Asiatic mainland, that prevented Western countries from following the paths of China and India.

His last major work on Ancient Judaism attempted to explain the circumstances which resulted in the early differences between Oriental and Western religion. The asceticism of Western Christianity clearly contrasted with the mystical contemplation developed in India. In summary Weber felt that Judaism was free of magic and esoteric speculations, devoted to the study of law, vigilant in the effort to do what was right in the eyes of the Lord in the hope of a better future, the prophets established a religion of faith that subjected man's daily life to the imperatives of a divinely ordained moral law. In this way, ancient Judaism helped create the moral rationalism of Western civilisation. ([www.Wikipedia.com](http://www.Wikipedia.com))

Through his writings Weber argued that religion offers society an explanation of two distinct concepts which are innate human needs and often conflicting in the individual. *Theodicy*, which reconciles the existence of evil in the world, often with a benevolent God of good, argues for justification of God and is concerned with reconciling God's goodness and justice with the observable facts of evil and suffering. *Soteriology* looks specifically at salvation of the individual often from a divine source. These concepts offer answers to questions concerning death, suffering, good fortune, and general meaning in the world. The pursuit of salvation, he held, similar to the pursuit of wealth, becomes a part of human motivation.

In classifying religious values, Weber distinguished between *this-worldliness* and *other-worldliness*. He argued that religious values tended toward one orientation or the other. For instance Christian and Hindu beliefs tend to fulfill worldly tasks in order to gain other worldly goals. Calvinistic views, although originally concerned primarily with heaven and hell reversed their orientation, resembling historical Judaism, which recognizes this world as the primary center within which religious values are affirmed. (Bensman/Rosenberg, 1976, p. 474)

Weber distinguishes between *ascetic* and *non-ascetic* values. Asceticism includes denial of the flesh, all primal pleasure impulses. This offers the believer renunciation and purification, the attainment of everlasting salvation. This is often found in Buddhism and Christian monastic life. *Rationality* was another concept which Weber found in religious values. For instance nirvana to the Hindu is attained by achieving unity with the supernatural. *Ethics* is also an important concept in religion with many Western traditional values linked to Judeo-Christian ethics. *Mysticism* and *magic* were also found among many of the religions which Weber studied. He concluded that religious systems bearing the same name, over time, may shift among the various concepts of asceticism to mysticism to ethical, etc, depending on the changes in society.



### ***Secularization and Rational Choice Theories***

Grace Davie in her essay *The Evolution of the Sociology of Religion* (Dillon 2003), talks about the two strands of theory which developed almost separating American sociology theory and European thought on the topic of religion. In Europe, although it is losing some favor lately, *Secularization Theory* is much more common while the American sociologist often follows the alternate view based on *Rational Choice Theory*, a theory which actually originated in the discipline of economics, but has since been prevalent in other social science disciplines as well. Rational choice stresses the utility of the individual's personal decision and assumes that the best means to achieve ends will be chosen. Needless to say the two theories arose out of very different socio-political environments concerning church and state separation. America's founding fathers specifically kept religion out of state and federal government control, while offering religious freedom to the people, while most of Europe continued with state sponsored religions which were funded with tax dollars. Over the later part of the past century attendance and participation throughout much of Europe has declined with less than enthusiasm from the remaining participants, while America has seen a substantial increase in general participation as well as new formed religions. (Gelles & Levine, 1999, p. 483)

Wikipedia defines the term secularization as *a process of transformation of a society which slowly migrates from close identification with the local institutions of religion to a more clearly separated relationship*. Classical theorists such as the three discussed above, Marx, Durkheim, and Weber all postulated that the modernization of society would initiate a decline in levels of religious practice. Cultural shifts will emerge in society in response to the development and dependence of science, rational thought, industrialization, and urban growth. Weber called this process *the disenchantment of the world*.

There are various definitions as well as reasons argued for and against secularization theory but due to time restraints, I will briefly go through a few. *Structural differentiation* is the force of evolutionary change in society, a process of devolution in which religion ceases to function as the regulatory code for all social life as it once did, increasingly becoming a separate institution with more limited functions. Replacement of superstitious thinking with *empiricist and scientific* ideas and *Classical liberalism* which promoted individual rights rather than the importance of community and collectivism are also concepts which are argued that a secular society would emerge. (Beckford, 2003, p. 35)

However, the classical secularization theory due to modernization is often dismissed by many, arguing that religious participation is not declining, but merely changing. In America where we have seen over two hundred years of deregulated religion and heavy pluralism in the institution, religious participation has not at all declined. Many theorists adhere to the *religious economies model*, which is sometimes interchanged with *rational choice theory*. Although rational choice is a widely held philosophical school of thought which is often applied in various disciplines, the religious economies model is simply rational choice applied to the study of religion in society. These advocates claim that variations in religious participation is caused by differences in the structure of religious supply. The institution is viewed in itself as a market of religion. The freer markets are found to be the most pluralistic and active which is directly linked to competition. Deregulation increases the competitive supply which encourages personal choice and therefore higher interest, activity, and growth. So rather than focusing on an explanation of modernity's decline in the *demand* for religion such as secularization theory does, rational choice theory looks at the *supply* offered in society through deregulation.

The roots of this theory may be seen in Adam Smith's writings of utilitarian individualism in explaining and understanding broad society-wide developments as resulted out of decisions made by individuals. Human nature of the individual will influence their decision to make rational tradeoffs between costs and benefits, which may be seen as profits or other desired benefits. In the case of religious choice, the benefit may not be profitable in monetary value, but may be desired in social or psychological terms, or maintain benefits of spirituality for the individual. This supply side argument of religious stimulation claims that *religious vitality* is positively related to *religious competition* and negatively related to *religious regulation*. Lethargic participation will be seen in areas of church sponsored religion, religious monopolies, and high government regulation. (Dillon, 2003, Gorski p. 113)

Although not as popular, a third approach is found in the ***socio-political conflict model***. Unlike the secularization or the economies model, the SPCM stresses politics as a major factor in choice. This theory was developed and is often argued by historians rather than sociologists, although it is similar to the economies theory in that it stresses the effects of competition resulting in pluralism. However, the competition in this theory is not only for other religions but for other religious worldviews, as well as civil religions, and political ideologies. For instance, pluralism could mean socialism, liberalism, nationalism, as well as Judaism, Catholicism, or Protestantism. The theory holds that in situations of monopolies, church and state will identify with one another and opposition will evolve in an anti-clerical or anti-Christian direction, causing involvement to decay. Religious pluralism, on the other hand, will not automatically translate into opposition to the religion, as church leaders are independent of the state and ruling class, therefore activity does not decay. (Dillon, 2003, Gorski p. 116)

A fourth model, again not as popular, but based on classical thought, is the *socio-cultural transformation model*. Classical sociological theory presents two possible approaches to the secularization debate. Durkheim speculated that the once monopolized intellectual labor of predominately priestly classes in Western societies began to decline during the Renaissance. This decline initiated the separation of who held jurisdiction and over what areas of knowledge. Sharp lines between religious and nonreligious domains and institutions began to develop. As a result, the gradual removal of religious language and authority, along with a heavy influence of nonreligious moral valuation, encouraged a secularization pattern in certain societies, predominately in the West.

Another approach to the SCTM was influenced by Weber's sociology of religion and his essay *Religious Rejections of the World*. It speculates that the world-rejecting religions of South Asia and the Middle East which are more transcendental in nature, clashed with the traditional God concept of the Western world. Weber held that the conflict and consequences between the two developed an ever growing differentiation between the religious and the nonreligious, which grew further in the West than other parts of the world. (Dillon, 2003, Gorski p. 120 )

**Rodney Stark**

Rodney Stark is a current leader in the study of economies of religion. His earlier work on cult development, *A Theory of Religion*, was written with William Sims Bainbridge in 1987. In it he began to develop his theoretical perspective on religion which starts with a concept of *compensators*, which is described as *the promise of a future reward that cannot be tested by empirical means*. When humans can not achieve a desired reward, they will accept a compensator instead which can compensate for a physical lack or frustrated goal. He breaks them further into two types, specific compensators or general compensators. Stark observes that social and political movements which fail to achieve their goals will often transform into religions. He concludes that if social movements fail to achieve goals through natural means, members will look for divine guidance to achieve goals. His theory proceeds to embellish four models of cult formation:

- *psychopathological model*- cults are founded through periods of severe stress in the life of the founder.
- *entrepreneurial model*- founders act like entrepreneurs developing new products to sell to consumers.
- *social model*- group forms out of emotional bonds of early members.
- *normal revelations model*- founder interprets ordinary natural phenomena as divine or supernatural.

This led to a process model for Stark with the idea that secularization could be self-limiting because increased secularization of a church could and often did lead to the starting of a new sect through splintering groups. This led to his application of rational choice in religion. (<http://hrr.hartsem.edu/ency/StarkR.htm>)

Through the 1990's Stark continued his work with Roger Finke. In their essay *The Dynamics of Religious Economies*, religious economy is defined as *consisting of all religious activity going on in any society including both current and potential adherents*. *Sacralization* is defined as having little differentiation between religious and secular institutions, a merger of church and state. *Desacralization* is the opposite, a macro form of secularization. Finke and Stark offer five propositions concerning religious supply:

- an unregulated economy will tend to be pluralistic
- religious monopolies tend to exert influence over other institutions and therefore sacralize society
- deregulation of a previously regulated society will cause desacralization of society
- unregulated and competitive societies will have an overall higher religious participation
- even where competition is limited, religious groups serve as primary vehicles for social conflict and action for change, becoming a substitute for competition

The short term effect of deregulation are an increased supply of religions and the freedom to choose. The long term effect of change in regulation will see changes in the sacralization of society and the religious commitment of the people. Finke and Stark note that only 17 percent of the population of America during the Colonial period in 1776 were affiliated with an organized religion. The rate doubled to 34% by 1850 and by the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century it was well over half of the population committed to a religion. Stark's work argued in opposition to traditional theory of religion after modernity, which held that only a religious monopoly could enhance the spread of faith through society and that an increased emphasis on science and rationality would drive people away from divine explanations. (Dillon, Fink/Stark, 2003, p. 96-109)

**Robert N. Bellah**

Bellah, a student of Talcott Parsons, closely followed Parsons in Durkheim's structural thinking. His focus was centered on the *social evolution of religion* which he articulated in his essay, *Religious Evolution* (1964). In it he argues that evolution in the religious sphere is toward the increasing differentiation and complexity of symbol systems. He viewed ritual as humanity's basic social act and developed a detailed taxonomy of religion specifying five stages, which is often referred to as his *transformation theory*:

- *Primitive* (ex: Australian Aborigines)-a fluid mythology which unites humans to animals, past, present and future in a meaningful order.
- *Archaic* (ex: Native American)-mythical figures become gods with distinct characterizations and powers over humans and natural events.
- *Historic* (ex: ancient Judaism, Islam, Palestinian Christianity)-preoccupation with dualistic world beyond and salvation of the individual.
- *Early Modern* (ex: Protestant)-rejection of intermediary between god and individual.
- *Modern* (ex: religious individualism, civil religion)-individual interpretation of god and religion, organized religion loses monopoly.

(Gelles & Levine, 1999, p. 497-9)

Bellah coined the term *civil religion* and wrote extensively on the topic, placing it in his last stage. In this stage he predicts that the individual should be capable of continual self-transformation, and within limits, capable of remaking world order. He held that Americans embrace civil religion with certain beliefs and values independent of their chosen religion. He argued that America has experienced three periods when a large number of Americans were cynical about the American creed; the birth of the nation, the Civil war period, and the 1960's.

### ***Current Trends in Religion***

The *New Age* subculture is a broad movement of late 20th century in America characterised by an eclectic and individual approach to self spiritual exploration. With continued themes from the 1960's counterculture movement, the movement quickly spread through occult communities through the 70's and 80's. Rather than following an organised religion, those who are affiliated typically construct their own spiritual journey based on individual beliefs and needs. Material is taken as needed from various world religions and mystical traditions. The movement's strongest supporters are followers of esotericism, a religious perspective based on the acquisition of mystical knowledge seeking personal transformation and self healing. Other popular concepts used are Eastern meditative thought practices, shamanism, neopaganism, crystal use, angel belief, use of mediums, astrology, alchemy, magic, and occultism.

It is considered an alternative search for spirituality using an integration of mind, body, and spirit with many ideas rejecting mainstream Western organised Judeo-Christian traditions and or Positivism. Divine guidance is a more appropriate guide for New Age thinking, rather than rationalism, scientific skepticism, or the scientific method. The movement still remains steady although its height was during the late 80's and early 90's.

The increased following of this type of practice as a religion clearly shows the changes in society's conceptualization and regulation of what counts as religion in today's world. In *Social Theory and Religion*, James Beckford, a social constructionist, asserts that "whatever else religion is, it is a social phenomenon regardless of whether religious beliefs and experiences actually relate to supernatural realities.... religion is expressed by means of human ideas, symbols, feelings, practices and organizations and these expressions are all products of social interaction, structures, and processes".



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