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Religion's Role in Societal Dynamics: From Symbolic Interpretations to the Power Dynamics of Civil Religion

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Abstract: This paper examines the sociological impact of religion in society across three dimensions. It defines religion through Durkheim's perspective, explores the socio-psychological effects based on Mehan, Wood, Merton, and Fanoz, and delves into religious symbolism drawing from Geertz and Bellah. Emphasizing moral values in religious beliefs, the paper argues that societies rely on religion for social order. Using the Azande tribe as a case study, it illustrates the subjective nature of reality and the link between religious rituals and community harmony. This paper addresses historical suppression during colonialism, discusses Fanon's insights, explores Geertz's symbolic interactionist perspective, and analyzes Civil Religion, highlighting its potential political misuse in the American context. Ultimately, it recognizes religion's influential role in shaping societal dynamics and human interpretations while acknowledging the importance of moral values and symbols.

Keywords: religion; civil religion; reality; symbols; and moral values

INTRODUCTION

The primary focus of this paper is to analyze the significance of religion in the organization of society. The paper is divided into three sections, each exploring a dimension of religion's impact on society. The first section defines religion, highlighting its distinctive features such as rites, beliefs, and moral community as emphasized by Durkheim. The second dimension compares the works of Mehan and Wood with those of Merton and Fanoz to elucidate the socio-psychological impact of religion. Finally, the third dimension relies on Geertz's findings to connect religious symbolism as an effective tool for social organization. Additionally, Bellah is introduced to partner with Geertz in examining the potential formation of a national religion.

Moral values rooted in religious beliefs play a pivotal role in shaping societies, encompassing various faiths like Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism, etc. Virtually every society incorporates some form of religious system in its practices. This prevalence can be attributed to the benefits of religion in maintaining social order by influencing individuals' characters and providing foundational values for societal norms and laws. Religion offers individuals a sense of belonging through membership in diverse religious faiths. Belonging to a religious faith not only extends but also preserves a person's social network, acknowledging that human beings are inherently social, and isolation contradicts their nature.

Religion serves a dual purpose by providing a spiritual connection with the divine and fostering social relationships among individuals. This duality may explain why religious individuals tend to experience greater happiness than their counterparts. However, it is essential to consider that non-religious individuals may perceive themselves as having more freedom due to fewer restrictions and the absence of religious expectations deeming certain practices as sinful. Nonetheless, a counter-argument suggests that the support system provided by religion outweighs the broader freedom of actions enjoyed by non-religious individuals.

Grabmeier's (2018) study delves into the relationship between religiosity and longevity, establishing a positive correlation between the two variables. Societies with a high religious consciousness were found to impact the longevity of residents' lives. Moreover, religious individuals

were inclined to belong to both religious and non-religious social groups. Grabmeier's (2018) conclusion aligns with the notion that the comfort derived from religious beliefs acts as a coping mechanism. In summary, the study indicates that religious affiliation serves as a potential factor for gauging life expectancy in individuals

BASIC COMPONENTS OF RELIGION

Durkheim's assertion, "In reality, then, there are no religions which are false. All are true in their fashion; all answer, though in different ways, to the given conditions of human existence" (1968, p.3), challenges the notion of falsehood in religions. He contends that religions, each in their unique manner, provide valid responses to the inherent conditions of human existence. Expanding on this idea, Durkheim (1968) elucidates that not all religions necessarily involve a god figure or an interpersonal relationship with divine beings. Drawing insights from the religious structure of Buddhism, he notes that, despite the absence of a supreme deity, Buddhism qualifies as a religion due to its emphasis on moral guidance. The Four Noble Truths presented by Buddha serve as a moral compass for Buddhists, akin to the moral frameworks in Christianity, exemplified by the Ten Commandments, and in Islam through the Hadiths.

Durkheim (1968) contends that religion extends beyond the exclusive focus on spirits, emphasizing that it cannot be narrowly defined in such terms. He points out that Buddhism, lacking a belief in a supreme being, qualifies as a religion because it constitutes a community bound by moral values. In defining religion, Durkheim (1968) underscores the significance of beliefs and rites. Religious beliefs are described as "the representation which expresses the nature of sacred things & the relations which they sustain, either with each other or with profane things." Rites, on the other hand, are "the rules of conduct which prescribe how a man should comport himself in the presence of these sacred objects" (p. 35). However, relying solely on these components poses challenges, as it might categorize groups like magicians as religions, given their possession of beliefs and rites. Magicians, focused on profit and self-praise, lack the essential moral community integral to the concept of religion.

Building on Durkheim's perspective, the definition of religion emerges as comprehensive. It transcends the necessity for a supreme being or a close relationship with divine entities. While beliefs and rites remain fundamental, moral values play a crucial role in guiding the conduct and behaviors of a religious community. Durkheim (1968) succinctly defines religion as "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" (p. 47). This definition encapsulates the broader sociological understanding of religion, emphasizing its unifying role in fostering a moral community among its adherents.

SOCIO-PSYCHOLOGICAL DIMENSION

Religion as one of the Possible Realities

Mehan and Wood's (1983) conceptualization of reality unfolds through a five-fold framework, with the focus here on "reality as a reflexive activity," particularly as it pertains to spiritual reality. This first feature is exemplified by the religious practices of the Azande tribe, offering insights into the subjective nature of reality and the interpersonal dynamics within their unique worldview. Describing the Azande people as inherently religious, Mehan and Wood (1983) highlight their unwavering devotion to their deity, notably observed in critical decision-making processes. When faced with pivotal choices, such as where to build their houses or whom to marry, the Azande consult an oracle through a meticulously prescribed ritual. This ritualistic practice underscores the profound influence of religious teachings, encouraging devotees to maintain a close relationship with the supreme being through continuous communication. Devotees share the developments in their lives, present and forthcoming, with the deity during the ritual, seeking guidance or directives in response to their circumstances.

Merton's (1957) distinction between manifest and latent functions provides a lens through which to analyze the seemingly irrational aspects of these rituals. While the preparation of concoctions and feeding them to chickens might appear irrational in their manifest goals, Merton suggests that these behaviors hold latent functions. Drawing parallels with rain dancers, whose dances may not cause rain but foster group unity, rituals among the Azande serve a latent function by enhancing spiritual harmony within the community. Despite the apparent irrationality of certain actions, these rituals contribute positively to the cohesion and shared beliefs of the religious community.

The clash between the Azande's religious practices and Western scientific perspectives introduces a potential threat to the tribe's religious consciousness. Western science challenges the validity of the ritual process, asserting that the bark used in the concoction is poisonous and could harm the chickens. This contradicts the Azande belief that the deity communicates through the chickens' reactions, influencing the outcome of the ritual. The Azande's predetermined interpretation of the chicken's fate as an affirmative or negative response shapes their understanding of the oracle's guidance.

In the face of such challenges from Western science, the Azande maintain the integrity of their belief system. Mehan and Wood (1983) emphasize that what might be perceived as contradictions by Western standards are not contradictions for the Azande. The Azande view these events through the lens of their own reality, grounded in the assumption of the oracle's existence. Despite the clash with Western scientific perspectives, the Azande's commitment to their religious worldview remains steadfast, illustrating the resilience of their cultural and spiritual framework against external critiques.

The potential contradiction posed against the Azande's spiritual beliefs serves as a mechanism for reaffirming the efficacy of their belief system, according to Mehan and Wood (1983). They argue that the Azande's response, wherein seeming contradictions are explained away through mystical notions like breached taboos or interventions by sorceresses, witches, ghosts, or gods, is a common strategy employed to validate traditional knowledge when under scrutiny. Drawing an analogy, Mehan and Wood (1983) highlight that individuals, when faced with a mathematical calculation like 2 + 2, expect a specific result. If someone produces a different figure, they feel compelled to identify and rectify the error.

Mehan and Wood (1983) provide insight into the Azande's interpretive framework, explaining that failures in the ritual process do not challenge the oracle; instead, they are elaborated to provide evidence for the constant success of oracles. The authors introduce the concept of "an incorrigible proposition," defining it as a statement that one would never admit to be false, regardless of circumstances. This notion, they argue, is compatible with any conceivable state of affairs. In the context of the Azande's oracle, it is portrayed as all-knowing and unfailing. Consequently, the tribe interprets any undesired outcome as an error on the part of the ritual performer, attributing faults to elements used or the administration of the concoction.

While Mehan and Wood (1983) initially present reality as subjective, they address the question of the validity of different realities and the reliance on incorrigible propositions in the later stages of their work. In discussing the fragility of reality, they assert that every reality depends on ceaseless reflexive use of a body of knowledge in interaction and is equally susceptible to dissolution if these components are disrupted. This perspective introduces the notion that reality, regardless of its subjective nature, is not immune to challenges or alterations. The fragility of reality suggests that even seemingly robust belief systems, such as that of the Azande, are vulnerable to potential disruptions or transformations when confronted with external influences or internal dynamics.

Human history bears witness to instances where certain realities were suppressed, and the colonial era stands out as a potential illustration of such suppression. During this period, colonial powers employed imperialistic strategies, discrediting the religious realities of Africans by labeling them as heathen and imposing their own cultural norms on the indigenous populations. Frantz Fanon (1952) extensively examined the impact of colonialism on the cultural identity of Africans, emphasizing that the dismissal of their religious beliefs and practices played a pivotal role. According to Fanon (1952), the colonial project involved branding African culture as inferior, positioning it in

stark contrast to the perceived superiority of the 'white culture'. The implication was that, for a black individual to attain a higher status, they were compelled to forsake their own cultural reality and adopt that of their colonial masters. Fanon vividly expresses this dynamic, stating, "Every colonized people...find itself face to face with the language of the civilizing nation; that is, with the culture of the mother country." The elevation of the colonized, in Fanon's view, was contingent upon the extent to which they embraced the standards of the colonizing nation. Paradoxically, the more they renounced their indigenous identity, the more they were deemed to be "whiter" and elevated from what was derogatorily termed their "jungle status" (Fanon 1952, p.56).

Fanon (1952) contends that the colonial masters effectively suppressed the realities of Africans by specifically targeting their religious beliefs. This strategic move, he argues, invaded the sense of purpose within these communities. The religious beliefs held by African societies not only shaped their cultural fabric but also provided a framework for interpreting the world. Discrediting these beliefs raised fundamental questions about the very foundations of their community life. This aligns with the sociological understanding that religious beliefs play a crucial role in shaping interpretations of the world, fostering moral values, and providing a shared framework for community life. The colonial strategy, therefore, went beyond territorial conquest; it sought to reshape the very essence of the colonized societies by undermining their cultural and religious foundations.

SOCIO-ORGANISATION DIMENSION

Religion as a Cultural System

Clifford Geertz (1973) advocates for the understanding of religion through the lens of its traditional system of symbols. This involves examining the intricate relationship between religious symbols, the faithful, and the profound meanings ascribed to these symbols. He succinctly defines religion as "a system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic" (Geertz 1973, p. 90).

Geertz (1973) posits that a more precise definition of religion can be derived by delving into the images evoked by religious symbols and the emotional connection devotees harbor toward them. Traditional symbols, whether tangible or intangible, such as stars, crosses, stories, rituals, or holy books, serve as conduits of meaning within a religious context. These symbols carry profound emotional weight as they aid believers in making sense of human realities, particularly in narratives that elucidate the purpose of human existence. For instance, Christianity and Hinduism each possess distinct creation stories, fostering an interpersonal relationship between divine beings and humanity, providing a profound sense of purpose. The resonance of religious symbols with the moral values of the faith helps in maintaining harmony and cohesion among adherents.

Religious symbols, according to Geertz (1973), hold diverse meanings contingent upon the observer's religious orientation. Interaction with sacred symbols is only meaningful if the observer is cognizant of their significance and if their beliefs align with the teachings of the religion. Rituals, as a subset of religious symbols, can be defined as prescribed sets of proceedings involving words and body movements. Collins (2004) expands on this notion, describing rituals as interaction rituals that invoke solidarity among participants through shared values and beliefs, reinforcing their identity as a moral community.

Collins (2004) highlights the emotional dimension of interaction rituals, emphasizing that emotions are aroused and become a shared experience among participants. For example, burial ceremonies, a form of ritual found in various religious traditions, elicit collective grief, fostering a shared sense of loss. While the intensity of emotions may vary individually, the collective experience serves to strengthen the bonds within the community. In essence, religious symbols, especially in the context of rituals, play a pivotal role in fostering a sense of unity and shared experience among believers.

Collins (2004) also recognizes that certain aspects of interactional rituals may face challenges in fulfilling their functions due to technological advancements. He specifically notes the impact of modern communication tools such as telephones and television, suggesting that these technologies might undermine the ritual chains among participants by diverting focus. Collins argues that the use of modern communication devices, like phones, creates a barrier to the emotional intensity that would be present in face-to-face interactions. Despite these challenges, religious rituals continue to achieve their intended purposes, as evidenced by the popular phrase "distance is not a barrier," often employed in televised religious sermons. This adaptation of modern technology by religion extends to various forms of communication, serving as a platform for the widespread dissemination of religious teachings.

The emotional experiences generated during interaction rituals have the potential to forge bonds among individuals, aligning them toward common goals. Bellah (1970) explores how moral values expressed in religious beliefs can give rise to a national religion, which he terms Civil Religion. This conceptualization arises from the ability of religiously inspired moral values to coordinate individuals, fostering a collective commitment to communal objectives. Bellah's (1970) analysis primarily focuses on American Civil Religion, illustrating how the intertwining of religious and national values contributes to a shared identity and purpose within society. This phenomenon showcases the adaptability of religion to utilize modern technology while emphasizing its role in shaping collective identities and fostering a sense of unity among diverse populations.

Civil religion

Bellah (1970) characterizes Civil Religion as a concept acknowledging the moral values expressed in a nation's public rituals, ceremonies, and symbols. Values such as justice, compassion, courage, cooperation, and equality find significance in these national emblems, traditions, and ceremonies, exemplified by the national flag, oath of office, national anthem, and inauguration. Dwight Eisenhower's assertion, "Our government makes no sense unless it is founded in a deeply felt religious faith," as cited by Bellah (1970), underscores the nature of American civil religion. Bellah illustrates how political figures, especially former presidents, effectively evoke civil religion in their speeches without explicitly emphasizing any particular religion. He references J.F. Kennedy's 1961 inauguration address, where Kennedy mentions values like freedom, blessings, and belief in a supreme being (God).

In Kennedy's speech, God is invoked three times, and a closer examination of these instances reveals the intended values he seeks to evoke. The first instance, where Kennedy talks about previous presidents and God, can be interpreted as an attempt to legitimize his office as an ordinance of God and the law. While interpretations may vary, a common theme emerges—Kennedy seeks to channel these invoked emotions toward a shared goal. He achieves this by tapping into the idea of a Supreme being (God), a belief shared by many Americans. Despite the diverse meanings attributed to this concept based on individual religious orientations, most people acknowledge the moral values expressed in religious teachings. Bellah (1970) explains that despite America being a secular country, religious values have significantly influenced its cultural framework. This influence is evident in public rituals such as the oath of office, where elected officials swear allegiance to God and the people, as well as common expressions like "in God we trust" and "God bless America." These phrases have become traditional closings for political speeches, reflecting the enduring impact of religious values on the cultural identity of the nation.

Bellah (1970) observes that despite Kennedy being a Catholic, none of his speeches directly recommended or referred to Moses, Christianity, or any specific religion. Instead, Kennedy focused on promoting common moral values shared by many religions. This approach allowed him to connect with a broader audience regardless of their religious orientations, avoiding any violation of the separation between state and religion. By emphasizing universal moral values, Kennedy effectively tapped into the emotions embedded in these values, fostering a collective understanding of purpose.

Further, Bellah (1970) explains that the early American presidents set the structure and tone of civil religion. While drawing inspiration from Christianity, civil religion was intentionally kept distinct from any particular religion. The founders aimed to ensure that civil religion resonated more universally with the public. The tone of civil religion suggested a special connection between God and America, drawing parallels with the relationship between God and Israel. This sentiment is echoed in President Johnson's inaugural address, emphasizing America as a covenant-bound land conceived in justice and written in liberty. Bellah (1970) outlines how certain themes were introduced into American civil religion, attributing these emerging themes to the country's evolving circumstances. Before the Civil War, freedom was the central theme, interpreted in the biblical sense of the Israelites' exodus. George Washington was likened to Moses. After the Civil War, new themes of sacrifice and rebirth emerged to meet the emotional and social needs of Americans, reflecting the efforts of political elites to sustain and protect national unity.

The events following the tragedy of September 11 provide another perspective on the manifestations of "American Civil Religion." The change in the tone of George Bush's speeches, especially in the "War on Terrorism Script," played a crucial role in framing the narrative of good and evil, justifying military interventions in countries suspected of harboring terrorists (Chang and Mehan 2006). Chang and Mehan (2006) describe Bush's statement to the nation on the evening of September 11 as laying the groundwork for the War on Terrorism script. The speech framed the events as "a series of deliberate and deadly terrorist acts," perpetrated by "evil" forces against the symbol of American freedom. The narrative contrasted these acts with the altruistic responses of rescuing victims, caring for strangers, and giving blood—depicting Americans as the embodiment of good. The explanation of motive invoked the American Civil Religion, portraying a battle between the specified good (America, the beacon of freedom) and the specified evil (terrorism).

American Civil Religion proved instrumental in maintaining social order during a challenging period marked by heightened emotions. It served as a source of consolation for the bereaved and offered hope during times of uncertainty, effectively stabilizing emotions amid tragic situations (Chang and Wood 2006). Notably, the invocation of Civil Religion often rests in the hands of the political class in authority, utilizing it as a means to preserve social order and legitimize political decisions.

CONCLUSIONS

Throughout human history, religion has emerged as a potent tool for interpreting human realities and fostering stability in societies. However, it can also be manipulated to suppress alternative truths, as exemplified by colonial masters who used Christianity to discredit African religious realities. While religions don't necessarily require a god figure and interpersonal relationship with divine beings to be considered valid, a set of moral values remains integral for guiding adherents. Over the years, religion and religious practices have profoundly influenced human behavior, belief systems, and interpersonal interactions among devotees.

This paper recognizes that while religion might not wield the same organizing force in contemporary societies as it did in the past, it still plays a pivotal role in shaping societal dynamics. By delving into civil religion, this author illustrates how religion imparts moral values to national symbols. Justice, compassion, courage, cooperation, and equality find symbolic expression in national flags, oaths of office, national anthems, and inaugural ceremonies. Civil religion has become a significant aspect of American culture, aiding individuals in coping with challenging situations and mourning, such as the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks.

However, a critical issue surfaces when it becomes apparent that the determination and invocation of the nation's civil religion lie primarily in the hands of the politically powerful. Some political elites have historically exploited civil religion to justify wars and evade accountability to the public. Yet, there are instances where politicians have harnessed civil religion positively, invoking it to instill a collective sense of hope and belonging among the people.

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