

Sociology of Religion Intellectual Output 2, UNIT II



Co-funded by the
Erasmus+ Programme
of the European Union

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SOCIOLOGY OF RELIGION

1.1. What is sociology of religion

The sociology of religion studies religion as a product of the relationship and interaction between society, groups and individuals. The focus is on religion as it shapes and is shaped by society and culture, and as it is expressed by both individuals and groups.

Sociology of religion typically uses interviews, fieldwork or questionnaires. A sociologist of religion is not interested only in the perspective and practices of the religious specialists, but also in the ideas and the practices of common people.

More information on:

- [The sociology of religion](#)

1.2. Classical discussions within sociology of religion

The sociology of religion came into being at the end of the 19th century. One of the earliest sociologists of religion was Emile Durkheim (1858-1917), who believed that society works as an organic system. The various parts of society each have their specific function, and all functions to help maintain the organism in its entirety. Also religion contributes to this: through common rituals, the group worships itself, and through the rituals, the norms and values of society are expressed and reinforced.

From Durkheim's perspective, there would be no religion if there was no group or society. Religion is a group or societal phenomenon created by the community. In this sense, religion is created by society, and the individual is in no position to influence or even choose it.

Another of the early sociologists of religion was Max Weber (1864-1920). He found that it is actually the individual, i.e. each participant, who creates religion. Weber understood the actions of the individual as both rational and meaning-making.

Since Durkheim and Weber, all sociologists of religion have had to consider whether it is indeed the overall societal structure or the actions of the individual, which constitute the most important and influential factor in society. Many have chosen one or the other, while others have tried to combine the two conflicting ideas.

Peter Berger (1929-2017) argued that people create religion, and that religion then, afterwards, forms the individual. This creates an interaction between the individual and religion with mutual influence on each other.



More information on:

- [Peters Berger's model of the individual and society](#)
 - Explanation of the terms "Externalization, objectification, and internalization"

Through the sociological approach, religion is perceived as a dynamic concept that changes society, while, at the same time, being continuously changed itself.

1.3. Lived religion

It can be useful to distinguish between official religion and unofficial religion. In official religion, there are rules about where and how a ritual must be performed, how a particular god is to be worshipped, and what it is permitted to believe in. Most often, it has been the religious elite, who at some point in history have drawn up creeds, established rituals, and decided what is required in order to perform the rituals.

In unofficial versions of a religion, everything that has not been written down and defined as “real religion” may be included: beliefs in demons and ghosts, the use of amulets, including, for example the use of the Bible for magical protection etc.

Unofficial religion is often referred to as “lived religion”, “popular religion”, or “folk religion”. This type of religion is practiced as much – or maybe more – than the official (often ‘elitist’) version of religions.

Official and unofficial religion mostly exist next to each and at the same time, and in the study of religion, it is often important to consider both. It is, however, not always easy: in types of religion like ancient polytheism, it is, for instance, impossible to conduct research with the use of questionnaires, fieldwork and interviews with ‘insiders’, and though there are other sources (e.g. archaeological) that may indicate ‘unofficial’ or ‘lived religion’, they may be difficult to interpret.

More information on:

- [Lived religion](#)
 - Source 2
 - Religious communities, individualized religion, and mixed religious traditions
- [Religious communities](#)
 - Source 1
 - Majority- and minority religion
- [Religion in modern and post-modern society: individualized religion](#)
 - Source 2
- [Religion in modern and post-modern society: secularization](#)
 - Source 1
 - The diminished importance of religion in modern society: secularization

By opening [this link](#), a page appears where the theoretical formulations here illustrated (Religious communities; Individualized and lived religion; Religion in modern and post-modern society) are accompanied by actual examples from the various religious traditions, with links to the corresponding sections of the various Digital Modules. Click on ‘Sociology of Religion’ and choose a category. Press ‘For Teachers’ or ‘Reflective questions’ for more didactical comments, questions, and tasks for the students.