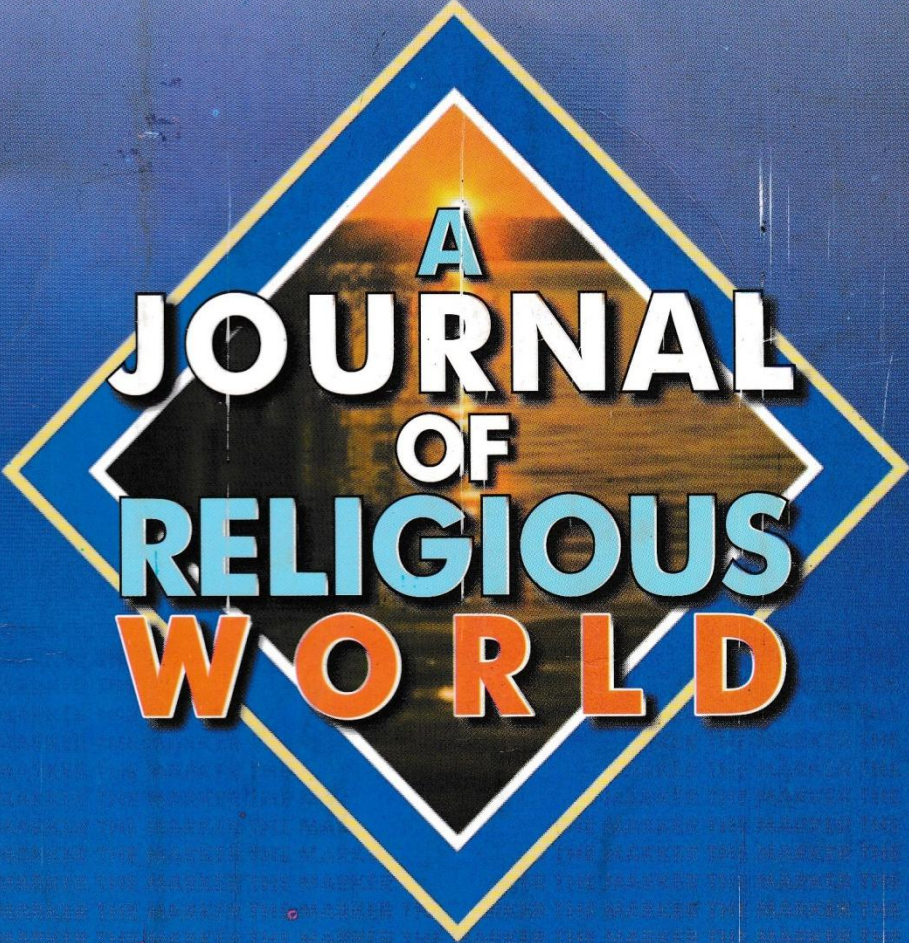


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THAT THE TRUTH BE DISCOVERED



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SOCIOLOGICAL APPROACHES TO THE STUDY OF RELIGION

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INTRODUCTION

Religion alongside arts and science must surely count as one of the most fundamental and pervasive aspects of human civilization. As such, it is worthy of the most careful study. But religion is such a complex far reaching aspect of human life, has it that no single discipline can hope to achieve a comprehensive study of it. Religion is a complex subject. Moreover, we may understand religion polymethodologically. That is with the employment of many methods, historically, theologically, psychologically, anthropologically, and sociologically. we can understand the sociological approaches to the study of religion by beginning with what it is. Probably, not be confused with the study of distinguish a religion as best or false. Its primary concern is not to justify or refute some particular sets of religious beliefs in the society but what religion does to the society. Better put, the positive contributions of religion to the growth of our society.

It is important to recognize, however that there is a considerable overlap between theology and religion.

Religion in sociological thinking is not really set to study the different sources of religion but to study religion from the vantage point of view of the changes in the behavioural pattern of human culture of a given society.

When Emile Durkheim, a sociologist discusses on the sociology of religion based on the roles which religion performs in mediating the societal tension in generating social solidarity of the said society (Northcott, 96) or when Karl Marx speaks about religion as a kind of ideology, belief systems used by groups to justify their worldly activities. It is therefore difficult to classify their works as belonging solely on religion but sociological look at religion.

Theology seeks to ground religious belief basically of faith against empiricism. It deals with what is revealed than what is "reasonably" upheld.

Sociological approaches to the study of religion is basically a social product and an agent of social order. It is a way sociology sees religion.

2. DEFINITION OF TERMS

Among other difficulties which may impede the study of any subject, that of language holds a leading place. Words are relative, but the aim of this section is to define terms to clear ambiguity, according to how they are used in this work. It includes words like sociology, society, culture and religion.

2.1 **SOCIOLOGY:** Social science is the scientific study of human society and behaviour, including such disciplines as sociology, economics, political science and anthropology. But sociological in its unique province is the systematic study of human social interaction. Its emphasis is on relationships and patterns of interactions that is how their relationships are developed, maintained and responding to change in a community. Sociology penetrates into all areas of social science.

2.2 **SOCIETY:** Society is a community, fellowship, or company. It contains the conventions and opinions of a community. (The Chambers Dictionary of English Languages 1638).

2.3 **CULTURE:** Culture is generally understood as a way of life of a particular society. It a complex whole including language, religion, commerce and others.

2.4 **RELIGION:** Religion does not have a general and acceptable definition. It may be defined as a relationship established between man and a transcendent personal being, a deity believed to exist. Yet this definition which I may think more appropriate is not without flaws. It does not seem to favour Buddhism as it was taught and practiced by Buddha himself².

The struggle with the definition of religion is mainly sociological as put below.

3. TOWARD A DEFINITION OF RELIGION:

A Sociological Approaches:

The best was to answer the question "what is religion? Is probably to give the universally acceptable definition, if there is. Unfortunately there is no such definition. So, attempting to define religion is a difficult task. Religion is conceived differently in Psychology, sociology, philosophy, Anthropology and even Marxism. However, professor F.M. Mbom in his lecture notes on methods and theories of Religion holds that "how one defines religion will certainly influence one's conclusion about religion's effect" (2). Therefore the definition of religion in this work will be how sociology look at religion not as done by other fields of endeavour.

Religion may be seen as one of the five basic social institutions such as family, economic, government, education and religion. Religion is the system of beliefs and practices, related to sacred things that unite believers into moral community. David Brinkerhoff adds:

Although, doctrines and rituals in religion vary from one society to another, all cultures and societies include a pattern of behaviour and belief that provides individual with explanations for events and experiences that are beyond their own personal control (50).

Sociologically, religion is the creation of the society. It is society which creates and uses religion as an instrument of control, unity and progress. Michaels S. Norhcott in sociological Approaches of religion opines thus:

Religion is one form of social construction. The gods, rituals, values and hierarchies of religious belief and behaviour are said by sociologists to acquire creative force in the social world. (Cornolly,93)

Sociologists concede that religion and deity are the personified force of

the society. God is therefore personified or attributed with the best quality of the society such as power, justice, wisdom, goodness and the rest. So what we call the commandment of God the moral demands of the society.

Northcott in agreement holds that most sociologists are of the opinion that the science of society contains within it "a certain anti-religious tendency" (193). This is so because of its methodological theories in observing the society or put in the language of Northcott "Empirical observations of human society which give rise to rational and positive accounts of social life" (195).

The summary of the sociological approaches to the meaning of religion is the Latin clause "*VOX POPOLI VOX DEI*" meaning "the voice of people is voice of God".

4. **WHY RELIGION? A Sociological Answer**

In sociology, religion is a fundamental feature of all societies; it is a part of the culture of that society whether primitive or advanced. Each society has forms of religious activity and expressions of religious behaviour. Why? The answer appears to lie on the fact that every individual in every cultural society must struggle to find explanation for events and experiences that are somehow beyond personal experience. So, it is religion that helps to interpret and cope with such experiences.

5. **SOME SOCIOLOGISTS ON THE STUDY OF RELIGION**

Within sociological approaches to religion, there are vertical distinct theoretical perspectives or school of thoughts. The first associated with Emile Durkheim, sees religion as the worship of society. The other associated with Max Weber views religion as an intellectual force of change that may challenge society as well as support it. And the last associated with Karl Marx, sees religion as an opiate force of the society that explains why the exploited masses are consoled in the capitalist system. The harmony of the three schools is that religion is the creation of the society.

DURKHEIM: Religion as the worship of society:

Durkheim is of the opinion that each society has what is called a set of

beliefs, a set of rituals and also developed a certain relationship between the sacred and profane. This relationship is peculiar to the society. He opines thus:

*Men know well that they are acted upon
but they do not know by whom.
So they must invent for themselves
in connection... for the collective force
is not outside of us: it does not act
upon us wholly from without (Durkheim, 207,208).*

This force known as religion serves functions for the community of believers for the society as a whole. It offers unity, support, consolation and reconciliation. Durkheim's function of religion supported by Northcott is that religion provides "a sense of solidarity and commitment to project the common wealth" (Cornolly, 196).

WEBER: Religion as a social change: For most people, religion is a matter of following tradition, people worship as their parents did before them. To Weber, religion is an independent force of change whose essence is the search for knowledge about the unknown. It is a way of coming to understand the world around us, the answers provided may be uncomfortable but may challenge the status quo as well as support it. It seems as one of the agents of socialization; language, education, information technology and religion.

In viewing religion, Weber gave it a more active role than did Durkheim. Northcott concedes:

Weber contended that religion was not just a social product, not simply a function of the human capacity to create societies but rather a source of ideas and practices which transcends the immanent social world. Religion in Weberian perspective is in different contexts both a source of social change and challenge and a source of social order and legitimation of the status quo (Approaches of the study of religion 199).

MARX: Religion as an opiate of society: Like Durkheim and Weber, Marx sees religion as a social producer and as a supporter of social

order. But this support range from injunctions that the poor and oppressed should endure rather than revolt. For example, the Christian Holy book says 'blessed be the poor, blessed be the meek and blessed be the humble. So, Marx's difference is seen by treating the support of religion in a negative way. He says:

*Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature,
the feeling of a heartless world just
as it is the spiritless conditions. (Marx, 208).*

It is in this sense that religion becomes the opiate of the masses. Northcott in analyzing Marx quotes McClellan on Marxism and religion thus:

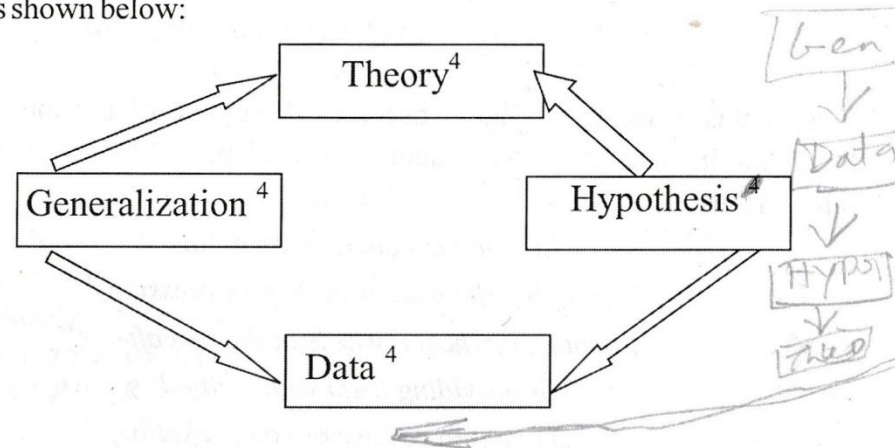
*Religion also acts as an opiate,
drugging the masses in their oppression,
promising them rewards in the hereafter
or providing them with a ritual
escape into ecstasy as compensatio
from their lowly status and oppression
in the here and now (Peters, 122)*

METHODS EMPLOYED IN SOCIOLOGICAL STUDY OF RELIGION AND THEIR VIABILITY.

Sociology focuses on the social dimension of religion that is, those aspects of religion affecting social behaviour and change. Sociologists therefore employ many methods to arrive at these religion's function in the human society. Reith A. Roberts posits that these methods are characterized by two sociological fundamental principles which are empirical data and objectivity (Robert 6). These principles assure sociologists to rely on data that are observable; in case of religion, observing the religious practices of different religions being objective (opened minded) in your study analysis.

The methods are:

SURVEY RESEARCH: This method sums up the process of asking the adherents of religion questions regarding their rituals and beliefs to ascertain its effects on the society, either in written or oral form, and recording their answers. It deals with an examination of theory. In the case of religion, theories about religion, deduced to Hypothesis, from hypothesis to Data and there to Data and there to Generalization. It considers two important principles known as Deduction and Induction as shown below:



SAMPLING: Sampling method is adhered to if the researcher has more religions groups among others for examination. Sampling works when researcher is objectively choosing a representatives of the religions which they are drawn so that the conclusions can be generalized.

CROSS-CULTURAL ANALYSIS: This method seeks to compare sociological patterns in several cultures, some ideas of whether a correlation is due to specific characteristics of one or holds for all sociological conditions (Robert, 13). This method therefore assesses cross-cultural religions and comparing their activities and functions in the society. Although this method keeps one in danger of being subjective and also counting the difficulty with conducting cross-cultural analysis of religion, the general principle of sociological approaches reminds one to be objectively considerable.

PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION: This method is used frequently to

study religions. The researcher therefore participates in the religion that he is seeking to study. He observes the adherents' behaviour and participated almost in all aspect of their religious rituals and liturgy for a period of time.

This method is also reliable because its gives insight to the researcher, trying to breach the gap between what the adherents of a particular religion says and what they do. It also gives room for observation of symbolic interaction with members who may not really know what is going on. *The observer employs the tools of deduction.* Deduction is devising hypothesis to test theory while induction is devising theory to account for empirically observed pattern. They involve reasoning.

Theory is an interrelated set of assumptions that explains observed pattern, Hypothesis is a statement about relationships that we expect to find if our theory is correct, Data is an intelligent guess to explain relationship between facts while Generalization in this sense is finding or conclusion of a certain subject.

EXPERIMENTATION: Experimentation is more reliable approach used in social sciences but not without flaws when used to study religion. Keith Roberts gives the reason thus:

Religion is so intensely personal and so deeply felt by so many people that manipulating it for purposes of study would not be tolerated (Robert 13).

However, experimentation can still be employed such as quasi-experimentation designed purposely to study religions. This type of experimentation may not follow all the scientific rules and procedures.

OTHER SOCIOLOGICAL METHODS: These includes: Content analysis, the procedure the researcher employed to get beyond the official doctrines of a particular religion and even the religious ideas that re appealing to the common man. Also, historical analysis, statistical analysis etc. *etc. with numerical data.*

With the employment of these methods above, sociologists posit

that beliefs are common to all religions but distinct to a particular religion. The sociological interest is therefore to assess the intimates the religious involved about it doctrines.

With the foundation of two sociological principles in methodology, the sociologist do posit for general impression about a religious group but seek to open up to the data and to avoid prejudgment of that particular religious process. *Some of the methods above may not be reliable, it failure gives way for the employment of others.* Collectively, they can provide checks and corrections on errors which any single method makes. They also check religions on its betrayal function in a given society.

EVALUATION/CONCLUSION

Sociology deals with what is empirically observable that is why it is so concerned with humankind and his environment, and therefore feels that religion is a creation of society and projected in the standpoint of human being. Not one religion is preferable for the society that is heterogeneous. Sociology sees religion as a concept peculiar to a particular people (society) and culture. It is therefore expression of the cultural worldview of a people.

Sociology says that society is the ultimate source of idea of religion sometimes God and of morality.

Marxist explanation on religion as the exploitation of the tenants, or poor and veneration of the landlords or bourgeoisies or capitalist explains the social stratification and social inequality in sociology. This explains why religion is generally practiced by the poor, and the rich. The rich oppress the poor and use religion as a sedative with which they calm down the exploited masses.

In the other angle, Weber's light is commendable that religion generates new idea and challenges the institutions of society.

Sociological studies of religion hold that religion within a particular society should be studied for better dialogue and tolerance. Religion is not set at variance with the human society, since it is an integral part of human culture. It is therefore a force of change, unity and solidarity.

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