

Introduction to the Sociology of Religion, part 1 (Christiano et al., chapter 1)

What is religion?

A **functional** approach to defining religion focuses on functions religion provides for a society.

Durkheim: “A religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden—beliefs and practices which *unite into one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them.*”

A **substantive** approach focuses on the content of religion.

Weber: “[R]eligion is a patterning of social relationships *around a belief in supernatural powers*, creating ethical considerations.”

A **situational** approach focuses on human actors as constructors of religious meaning.

Religions create *action orientations* (ritual & moral), consist of *systems of discourse*, and involves *subjective experience*.

Some Dimensions of Religion (from Max Weber)

“The kind of things we might want to pay attention to as we look at religion sociologically”: supernatural powers, charisma of leaders, symbolic expressions, a variety of forms of religious response (e.g., congregational vs. pilgrimage), types of leaders (e.g., priests vs. prophets), and patterned behavior of lay people.

Religions have to deal with soteriology (how are people saved?) and theodicy (what explains evil?).

The authors offer a neo-Weberian definition of religion:

“[T]wo sets of dynamics... characterize religions: on the one hand, a patterning of social relationships around perceived supramundane power; on the other ethical considerations. Besides the acknowledgement of ultimacy within a meaning system, we would look for perceived charismatic manifestations, leadership, organization, and the patterned intentional action on the part of members of the group, because they consider themselves members of the group, all as social relationships dimensions. Ethically, we would look for some concepts that explain evil and show how to be in right relationship with the ultimate (theodicy and soteriology).”