

Framing the Sociology of Religion

Every discipline is defined by a subject matter and an approach to that subject matter. Certain questions or truth-claims, which may be relevant within another framework, are irrelevant within that discipline. Making an irrelevant statement among members of the discipline, e.g., at a graduate seminar or academic conference, will signal that the speaker is an outsider who doesn't understand what is going on.

Discipline

Irrelevant truth claim

Literature

“The events in that novel never took place.”

Math

“Seven is my lucky number.”

Biology

“Kitties are cuter than puppies.”

Astronomy

“God created the heavens and the earth.” “I'm a Scorpio.”

Sociology of religion

“Miracles are impossible.” “Jesus loves you.” “Religion should be a private matter.”

What is rationality?

From a sociological perspective, an argument is rational if it is convincing within a particular community. Rationality isn't a quality of an argument, but is related to the meaning of the argument for its audience.

In order for a statement like “Miracles are irrational” to be sociological meaningful, it needs to include additional information: for what community are miracles irrational (since they are rational for other communities).

Personal beliefs and sociological research

Examining beliefs, including one's own, from a sociological perspective involves raising such questions as "Who says?" and "Who benefits?"

The personal beliefs of a sociologist regarding a topic are irrelevant for understanding the topic since people act toward things based on the meaning of those things *for them*.

However, the personal beliefs of the researcher may enter into the research in a number of legitimate ways.

1. Beliefs and interests often influence what topics sociologists decide to study.
2. Studying someone with similar beliefs may result in additional insight that an outsider may not be able to develop.
3. On the other hand, studying people with different beliefs may provide some fresh perspective.
4. The sociologists' beliefs may raise sensitizing questions for further analysis.

Personal belief

"Miracles are impossible."

"Religion is irrational."

"X is the one true religion."

Sensitizing question

If the group I'm studying believes in miracles, do they encounter others in their society who believe miracles are impossible? What techniques do they use to counter this challenge?

Since rationality involves making judgments from a shared meaning system, from what perspective is a particular religion irrational? Who benefits by defining it that way? How do members of the religion respond to this claim?

How do religions that make exclusive truth claims operate in a pluralistic environment?