

SOCI 222

Comparative Social Institutions

Session 12 – Religion as a Social Institution

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Session Overview

- In all societies, there are beliefs and practices associated with the supernatural and these beliefs and practices affect human interaction. This session discusses religious beliefs and practices across different traditional societies.



Session Outline

The key topics to be covered in the session are as follows:

- Topic one - The concept of Religion and theories explaining its origin
- Topic two - The role of religion in traditional societies
- Topic three – Some Beliefs and Practices associated with the supernatural
- Topic four – The Relationship between religion and political organization

Reading List

- Assimeng, M. (2010). *Religion and Social Change In West Africa*. Accra: Woeli Publishing
- Nukunya, G.K. (2003). *Tradition and Change in Ghana (2nd edition): An Introduction to Sociology* Accra: Ghana Universities Press.

Topic One

THE CONCEPT OF RELIGION AND THEORIES EXPLAINING ITS ORIGIN



Religion as a Social Institution

- Religion as an institution has helped man to cope with his uninhibited speculations and worries
- It also helps man to tone down his emotions and general anxieties
- Religion helps to explain difficult and seemingly inexplicable events
- It is a system of beliefs and practices, found in every culture that formalizes the conception of the relation between man and his environment

Theories

- **Hebert Spencer** explains that religion's fundamental datum was the current generation's respect for older generations making it a kind of ancestor worship
- **Simon Patten** (1974) argues that, "Religion begins not with a belief in God, but with an emotional opposition to removable evils"
- **James Frazer** states that religion is a kind of individual emotional supplication to spiritual beings

Theories

- **Tylor**:- visions and dreams gave rise to man developing the concept of his soul as apart from his body, extending it to the whole material universe;
 - This gave birth to the concept of a belief in spirit, or animism, which is the least common element
- **Emile Durkheim**:- religion arose from the crowd excitement in group rituals, such as totemism
 - He also made a distinction between things with power (sacred) and those without power (profane)

Theories

- **Jonathan Turner** observes that, at first religions were not very elaborate, consisting of worship of dead relatives among hunters and gatherers
- The nature of religion began to change with horticulture and later agrarianism
- Religion became a centralized institution in people's lives as specialized religious practitioners emerged
- As a result, gods and supernatural forces became more powerful and numerous
- Ritual appeals to these forces became more frequent and organized in society

Defining religion

- Emile Durkheim 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 unites into one single moral community called a church, all those who adhere”
- James Frazer defines religion as “the propitiation or conciliation of powers superior to man which are believed to direct and control the course of nature and of human life”
- Nukunya defines religion as “beliefs and practices associated with the supernatural”

Topic Two

THE ROLE OF RELIGION IN TRADITIONAL SOCIETIES



Functions of religion

- Anthropologists and Sociologists are interested in the significance of religion, that is, what it does for society
- They are not so much interested in the claims of the existence or non-existence of God
- Rather they want to ask what functions (manifest or latent) religion performs for society
- Like other institutions, religion performs many functions for society

Functions of religion

- Provides a worldview which is a set of ideas and assumptions about how the world works
- Serves as a social control mechanism in society as it defines moral framework for members
- Provides comfort and psychological security in times of crises like death and misfortunes

Functions of religion

- Rites, rituals and practices require group activity which brings about solidarity
- Used by people to influence outcomes of events which they have no technical or rational control

Topic Three

SOME BELIEFS AND PRACTICES ASSOCIATED WITH THE SUPERNATURAL



African Traditional Religion and others

- African religion has many elements of worship referred to as the Pantheon of Hierarchy; This is made up of:
 - Supreme Being
 - Nature gods
 - Ancestral Worship
 - Lesser spirits (witchcraft, magic, divination)
- Other major world religions include: Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Buddhism, Hinduism and Taoism.

The Supreme being (God)

- In tradition society, God occupies the number one position in the hierarchy of pantheons;
- In many societies, there is no priest or temple for God as He is considered the creator of the world;
- The Akans call God “**Nyame**” (he satisfies), the Ewe call Him “ **Mawu**” (Greatest or one that will not kill), the Ga “**Nyonmo**”, the Yoruba call Him “**Olurun**” and the Kikuyu of Kenya call Him “**Murungu**”.
- The Ewes demonstrate their belief in God by their names such as Mawunyo (God is good), Mawuli (God exist), Mawunya (God knows) etc.

Topic Four

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN RELIGION AND POLITICAL ORGANISATION



Religion, Rituals and Political Organisation

- In traditional societies, there is close connection between religion and political organization
- As Radcliffe-Brown maintains, “in Africa it is often hardly possible to separate, even in thought political office from ritual or religious office, as the king is the legislator, judge, commander-in-chief and the chief priest”
- The chief’s religious and ritual duties and functions help to enhance his secular position
- He is expected to observe certain taboos to maintain a state of spiritual purity
- For instance, the Akan chief is forbidden to walk alone, eat in public or see a dead body

Divine Kingship and Divine Right of Kings

- The chief's spiritual purity is explained by the theory of Divine kinship developed by James Frazer in 1890
- According to him, most kings are not only rulers of the people but their bodies contains gods
- The gods will die when the person in whose body they reside dies or becomes sick
- It is therefore necessary for the king to be in a good state of health since his death or ill-health is disaster
- As a result, the king is not allowed to fall sick or show any sign of weakness which might cause his death

Divine Kingship and Divine Right of Kings

- Rather, when he falls sick or gets weak, he is put to death and the god in his body ritually transferred to the body of a stronger and healthier man
- It is believed that, this will save both the gods and the community
- In many traditional societies, the king is among the strongest, healthiest and most handsome
- He is kept in good health with the wives tasked to report any sign of failing health to the people
- Some aspects of this theory are associated with chieftaincy in Ghana esp. the concern about ritual purity of the king, taboos and secrecy about his health and death

Divine Kingship and Divine Right of Kings

- It is important to distinguish between Divine Kingship and Divine Right of Kings:
- **Divine Kingship** holds that, the king himself is a god or accurately possesses god in his body
- **Divine Right of Kings** holds that, kings have authority independently of their subjects' will and that authority to rule comes from god and the subjects can not challenge it

Sample Question

- Discuss the relationship between political organization and religious beliefs and practices in traditional societies.



References

- Nukunya, G.K. (2003). *Tradition and Change in Ghana (2nd edition): An Introduction to Sociology* Accra: Ghana Universities Press

