

Introduction to Religion and Society

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Key concepts, major theories, and contemporary issues

1. Foundations

Element	Definition	Core Questions
Religion	A system of beliefs, practices, symbols, and institutions that relate humanity to the sacred or transcendent.	What does the divine/ultimate reality look like? How should we live?
Society	A network of individuals and groups who share a common culture, institutions, and social structures.	How are resources, power, and meaning organized?
Religion? Society Interface	The reciprocal influence between religious ideas/practices and social life.	How does religion shape social norms? How do social changes reshape religion?

2. Classic Theoretical Perspectives

Perspective	Main Proponents	Core Idea	Example
Functionalism	Émile Durkheim, Talcott Parsons	Religion performs essential social functions (social cohesion, collective conscience, emotional support).	Durkheim’s “Sacred and Profane” – collective rituals reinforce group solidarity.
Conflict Theory	Karl Marx, Max Weber (in part)	Religion can legitimize inequality or serve as a tool of domination; also a potential source of resistance.	Marx’s “opium of the people” – religion masks class oppression.

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Symbolic Interactionism	George Herbert Mead, Erving Goffman	Meaning is created through everyday interaction; religious symbols are interpreted and negotiated.	Goffman's "presentation of self" in worship services.
Rational Choice / Market Theory	Rodney Stark, William Sims Brown	Religious participation is a rational decision; religious groups compete like firms in a marketplace.	"Religious economies" model explains growth of new denominations.
Secularization Theory	Peter Berger (early), Steve Bruce	Modernization leads to declining religious authority and practice.	Decline of church attendance in Western Europe.
Post?Secular / Revivalist Views	José Casanova, Peter Berger (later)	Religion persists and adapts; secularization is uneven and reversible.	Rise of Pentecostalism in the Global South.

3. Major Domains of Interaction

1. Social Integration & Identity

- Rituals, festivals, and communal worship create shared identity.
- Religious affiliation often serves as a primary "social group" label.

2. Moral Regulation & Law

- Religious doctrines shape norms on marriage, sexuality, bio?ethics, etc.
- Interaction with civil law: theocratic states, legal pluralism, and human?rights debates.

3. Economic Behavior

- Work ethic (Max Weber's *Protestant Ethic*), charitable giving, and religiously motivated entrepreneurship.
- Faith?based NGOs and micro?finance (e.g., Islamic banking).

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4. Political Power & Mobilization

- Religious parties, lobbying groups, and movements (e.g., Christian Right, Islamic political parties).
- Religion as a source of legitimacy for regimes or as a rallying point for protest.

5. Education & Knowledge Transmission – Religious schools, curricula, and the transmission of worldview. – Tensions between secular curricula and faith-based instruction.

6. Health & Well-being – Healing practices, faith-based counseling, and attitudes toward medical technologies. – Role of religion in coping with stress, grief, and community support.

4. Contemporary Issues & Debates

Issue

Sociological Lens Key Points

**Religious Pluralism & Multiculturalism