

Revision Notes

Syllabus Section: Religion

Syllabus Area: Theories of Religion

Issue: Interactionist Theories of Religion.

Introduction

Although it's evident that, like most sociological perspectives, Interactionism involves a broad and relatively diffuse set of sub-perspectives (Symbolic Interaction, Phenomenology, Ethnomethodology and so forth), we can outline a general sense of this perspective on religion in the following terms.

Firstly, most interventionists tend to adopt an **inclusive** view of religion (although, as we have seen in the first set of Notes in this series, there are differences of opinion as to exactly which belief systems are religious and which may not count as a form of religion).

Secondly, following from the above, Interactionist definitions tend to be **nominal**, in the sense that there is no very clear definition as to what constitutes "a religion". We will explore the reasons for this rather arbitrary approach to religious belief systems in more detail in a moment.

Finally, Interactionists tend to see religions as functional (although not necessarily in the same way that Functionalists such as Durkheim or Parsons viewed religion as functional). That is, functional in the sense of trying to understand what religion does for both the individual and the society within which they live.

Interactionist Perspectives

For Interactionists, belief systems help us to make sense of the things we experience in our daily lives. They represent a mental map that we construct to help us chart a course for a journey through the social world, just as we construct physical maps to help us chart a course for a journey through the natural world.

Although there are differences between the natural and social worlds (the former is seen to be governed by various general laws of development and behaviour - cause and effect, for example - whereas the latter is not seen to be underpinned by such laws), the analogy can still be used to illuminate some aspects of Interactionist thinking.

For example, when we set out on a journey in the physical world, a map helps us to plan our route - allowing us to identify potential problems in advance (the roadworks on the A46 that need to be avoided if possible), to decide whether to take the shortest possible route between two fixed points or whether to detour via a more scenic route and so forth.

In the physical world there are certain fixed points of reference (for example, if we set out on a journey to London from Poole, we can do so fairly safe in the knowledge that London will not have decided to move). However, even with a map surprises still occur (a road, for example, that has been closed since the map was printed or, more likely perhaps, a new motorway built after the map was printed).

In the social world it is clearly going to be more difficult to plan our journey - but we nevertheless do try to plan, if for no other reason than the belief that it makes things so much easier, less complicated and, perhaps, less threatening and frightening if things can be made to appear broadly predictable.

1. What concept could you apply to this situation of "normative confusion"?

However, because the social world is, according to Interactionists, less predictable than the natural world (people have consciousness - they are aware of both themselves and the world in which they live) it becomes more difficult to map accurately and with any great certainty. For example, the person who greeted us warmly yesterday may decide to treat us coldly tomorrow...

However, this is not to say that mapping is impossible, just more difficult in terms of accuracy and predictability. If it was not possible to map the social world it is unlikely that life as we know and understand it would be possible, for two main reasons:

1. People would act in unpredictable ways, making social interaction impossible.
2. We would constantly have to learn to behave in certain ways. The way we had learnt to behave today would be out-of-date and useless tomorrow - which would mean having to go through the learning process every single day of our lives...

In the social world, therefore, we create mental maps of that world - the society in which we live. In order to do this, Interactionists argue, the map has to be based upon something and this something is called, by Interactionists, a "universe of meaning" or, in Peter Berger's phrase, a cosmology. Such a cosmology establishes basic ground rules for the understanding of social life. In this sense, it:

- a. Helps us to explain the things we see (the difference between a car and an elephant, for example).
- b. Helps us to interpret the significance of the things we experience (for example, why getting educational qualifications is important in our society).
- c. Helps us to create a general body of stored, shared, experiences (customs, traditions and the like) which we can use as relatively stable reference points for our behaviour.
- d. Enables us to communicate with others on the basis of a shared understanding of the world (through a common language, for example, a set of shared meanings about the significance of events and the like).

2. How do our shared experiences of the social world help us to behave in broadly predictable ways?

As you will recall from your initial introduction to sociology, the concepts that can be applied to the above process are those of culture, socialization, roles, values, norms and so forth. These fundamental concepts should be very familiar to you and I don't propose to develop these ideas any further in this context...

If we think about the social world in the above terms, a couple of things follow:

- a. We are all socialized into some form of universe of meaning (religious, political, magical, scientific or - in modern societies a probable mixture of all or some of these).
- b. These cosmologies are social constructions. Our understanding of them derives from the things we learn through our socialization. We sustain them through our behaviour (that is, we act as if they had a permanent reality) and, through our actions we give these cosmologies legitimacy - they become "ways of seeing" that are real and sustainable.

Before we look in more detail about the way religious belief systems fit into the above, it might be useful to use an analogy to illustrate the concept of a "**universe of meaning**". Interactionists, for example, are fond of comparing individuals to actors; that is, people acting out roles in the social world. We can stretch this analogy somewhat to encompass the concept of a universe of meaning in the following way.

Imagine life as a television soap opera (Coronation Street, Brookside, Neighbours or whatever). In this world, the scriptwriter is a very powerful social actor, mainly because they write the lines that are spoken by the actors. The actors too are powerful, in their own way, since their job is to bring a script to life - to make it believable or real to the observer. Just as in the real world, some actors are better - more natural or believable - than others. However, the actors job is to interpret the script that is given to them - to play-out their allotted role in the drama.

The world of the soap opera is a very clearly-defined one. It is tightly controlled by the participants (by the writer in particular) and is subject to various conventions. In a general sense these conventions are like traditions and customs, whilst in a specific sense the actors and writer are socialized into obeying these conventions (a western soap opera, for example, has very different conventions from a police or hospital soap opera).

In this very small, tightly-controlled, world there is only one universe of meaning and the actors "take this world for granted". Actors in a police drama, for example, do not suddenly start acting as if they were in a western drama. To do so would be inconceivable within the conventions set by the particular genre (or type).

If we now apply the above to the distinction developed by Max Weber when he talked about traditional and modern societies, we can see the part played by religious belief systems in traditional-type societies and then expand this to encompass more modern-type societies.

In traditional societies, the range of belief systems is relatively small. Traditional societies normally only involve one universe of meaning because they are closed systems. That is, they are societies in which one belief system is continually emphasized and socialized into individuals, to the exclusion of all other belief systems.

In these societies, the basic script for social behaviour is written by powerful actors who, because of their privileged position in society are able to monopolise knowledge. Invariably, these powerful actors (or experts - people proficient in the

knowledge and use of a particular body of knowledge) are people such as priests, mainly because the Church is a central, very powerful, institution in such societies.

In knowledge terms, the Church is powerful because it monopolises knowledge about the world (in the absence of alternative belief systems such as science) and, most importantly, uses this knowledge to suppress alternative belief systems. For example, magic and witchcraft, on the one hand (heretics were persecuted, witches were punished and occasionally killed) and science on the other (the following reading from Boronski ("Knowledge", 1987) illustrates the way in which the Catholic Church attempted to prevent the spread of Galileo's ideas about the nature of the universe).

As societies modernize, however, two things start to happen.

Firstly, new ways of doing things start to develop (especially in relation to work and the production process). Technology starts to develop and with it scientific belief systems start to arise to provide different interpretations of the (social and natural) world.

Secondly, conflicts within the established belief system are magnified and, with the existence of alternative belief systems, the monolithic nature of the universe of meaning is gradually destroyed. This is not to say that belief systems simply disintegrate (people still have to follow some kind of script to their lives), but rather people start to have more choice in the matter. For example, in the American South, the Baptist religion remains strong in many communities and the schools and colleges tend to emphasize a literal, Biblical, version of human creation ("Creationism" - the story of Adam, Eve and the Garden of Eden). Evolutionary theory is either not taught or is simply offered as an alternative theory.

From the above we need to understand two main things:

1. People's beliefs about the world are related to the nature of the society in which they live. Beliefs support that society and, in turn, people's behaviour supports these beliefs.
2. Where alternative belief systems exist, social actors have the opportunity - denied to them in closed societies - to pick and choose the things they believe about the nature of the world.

In addition, the beliefs held by social actors do not have to be exclusive and consistent. For example, a belief that God made the universe does not mean that you cannot understand the natural laws governing that universe. Alternatively, it's not unknown for a scientist to pray that an experiment works as predicted...

In another respect, it is clear that the social and natural worlds are not separated. We frequently combine knowledge from one to create knowledge in and of the other. For example, knowledge of physics (electricity) enables us to control our environment (we can create artificial light - try to imagine what it would be like to live in a world governed only by the rising and setting of the sun...).

Thus, we can sum-up this section on Interactionism by noting the following:

In "The Social Reality of Religion", 1973, Peter Berger argues, like Marx, that religion is a form of ideology. However, his use of this idea is rather different, in that he discusses religion as a form of ideological framework for the interpretation and understanding of the world (rather than as a means of one class justifying its oppression of another class).

In past societies, for example, religion is seen to have served as a comprehensive ideological framework for the interpretation and imposition of meaning in a (potentially) chaotic and threatening world. In this respect, people attempt to impose a sense of order upon their world when it is threatened by "inexplicable" phenomena. For example, the three "D's" - Death, Disaster and Disease.

Such phenomena have, by definition, to be located within a framework of ideas that both gives them meaning and explains why they occur and in traditional, small-scale, technologically-underdeveloped societies religion provides just such a framework. This is because of the certainty it encourages - there is nothing that cannot be explained by a religion. It is a cosmology - a complete body of knowledge about the world.

Each cosmology has, however, to be supported. Ideas have to have a real meaning for people and this is achieved through the social reorganization of beliefs - in short, like Durkheim, Berger sees religious practices and ceremonies as functional in this respect. By practicing their beliefs - joining together in communal worship, for example - people can support and strengthen their view of the world.

The Persistence of Ideological Frameworks...

For Berger, the persistence of an ideology is explained in terms of its plausibility. That is, it must both:

Explain something

Explain it in a way that fits-in with people's current levels of understanding (It must have some meaning for them, through their experiences, for example).

In Modern societies, two things tend to happen:

Firstly, other ideological frameworks arise (specifically science) to challenge religion's claim to explain everything in the most plausible way possible. This competition tends to diminish the plausibility of religion and, consequently, erodes religion's claim to a monopoly of knowledge.

Secondly, other social practices perform the same type of functions previously performed exclusively by religious institutions. Political organizations, for example, can take-on the integrating, world-affirming, ceremonial role once performed exclusively by religion.

We can apply the above to an understanding of the theory of secularisation, where it is evident that Berger does not see this process as inevitable. However, the plausibility structure of religion does come under increasing challenge from scientific ideological frameworks in modern social systems. In this sense, religion becomes less plausible as a mode of explanation in some respects, whilst retaining a measure of plausibility in others. Thus, in some situations religious world-views can predominate, whilst in others scientific or magical world-views are able to predominate.

For example, in times of civil war, the political systems in a society are largely destroyed and the meaning system they support is rendered inoperable. In such a situation (for example, Iran in the 1980's or Yugoslavia in the 1990's) the plausibility of religion is enhanced and renewed precisely because it is a belief system that is able to operate in a situation of danger and confusion...