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| Functionalist theory |
| For functionalists, society is a system of interrelated parts or social institutions, such as religion, the family and the economy. Society is like an organism, with basic needs that it must meet in order to survive. These needs are met by by the different institutions. Each institution performs certain fucntions – that is, each contributes to maintaining the social system by meeting a need. Society’s most basic need is the need for social order and solidarity so that its members can cooperate. For functionalists, what makes order possible is the existence of value consensus – a set of shared norms and values by which society’s members live. Without this, individuals would pursue their own selfish desires and society would disintegrate.  **Durkheim on Religion:**  ***The Sacred and the Profane***:   * For Durkheim (1915; 1962) the key feature of religion was not belief in gods, spirits or the supernatural, but a fundamental disctinction between the sacred and the profane. * Sacred – things set apart/forbidden, inspire feelings of awe, fear and wonder, surrounded by taboos and prohibitions * Profane – things with no special significance, things that are ordinary and mundane * Religion is never just a set of beliefs – it involves rituals and practices in relation to the sacred, and these are *collective* (performed by social groups   ***Totemism***   * Durkheim believed that the essence of any religion would come from studying its simplest form in the simplest type of society (a clan society). He used studies of the Arunta, an Aboriginal Australian tribe with a clan system * Arunta clans consist of bands of kin who come together periodically to perform rituals involving worship of a sacred totem. The totem is the clan’s emblem e.g. an animal or a plant that symbolises the clan’s origins and identity. The shared totemic rituals venerating it (treating with respect) serve to reinforce the group’s solidarity and sense of belonging. * For Durkhei, when the clan members worship their totemic animal, they are in reality worshipping society – even though they themselves are not aware of it * The totem inspires feelings of awe in the clan’s members precisely because it represents the power of the group on which the individual is ‘utterly dependent’   ***The Collective Conscience***   * The sacred symbols represent society’s collective conscience – the shared norms, values, beliefs and knowledge that make social life and cooperation between individuals possible – without these, society would disintegrate * For Durkheim, regular shared religious rituals reinforce the collective conscience and maintain social integration – participating ‘binds’ people together reminding them that belong to a community/society to which they owe their loyalty * Religion therefore performs an important role for the individual - it makes us feel part of something greater than ourselves, and reinvigorates and strengthens us to face life’s trials and motivates us to overcome obstacles that would otherwise defeat us   Cognitive Functions of Religion   * Religion is not only the source of social solidarity, but also of our intellectual/cognitive capacities (our ability to reason and to think conceptually) * Religion is the origin of concepts and catgories (such as time, space, substance, numbers etc.) that we need for reasoning, understanding the world and communicating * Durkheim and Mauss (1903; 2009) argue that religion provides basic categories such as time, space and causation e.g. ideas of the creator bringing the world into being at the beginning of time – similarly the division of tribes into clans gives humans their first notion of classification therefore, for Durkheim, religion is the origin if human thought, reason and science   **Psychological Functions of Religion: Malinowski:**  Malinowksi agrees with Durkheim thar religion promotes solidarity, however in his view it does so by performing psycholigcal functions for individuals, helping them cope with emotional stress that would undermine social solidarity. He identifies two types of situation in which religion performs this role:   * *Where the outcome is important but is uncontrollable and thus uncertain*: he studied the Trobriand Islanders of the Western Pacific and contrasted fishing in the laggon and fishing in the ocean. He stated that lagoon fishing is safe and uses the predictbale and successful method of poisoning. When the islanders fish in the laggod there is no ritual. Whereas ocean fishing is dangerous and uncertain and is always accompanied by ‘canoe magic’ – rituals to ensure a safe and successful expediciton. Hes sees the ritual serving as a ‘god of the gaps’ - it fills the gaps in human beings’ control over the world, such as being unable to control the outcome of a fishing trip. * *At times of life crises:* events such as birth, puberty, marriage and especially death mark major disruptive changes in social groups. Religion hekps to minimise disruption e.g. the funeral rituals reinforce a feeling of solidarity among the survivors, while the notion of immortality gives comfort to the breaved by denying the fact of death. Malinowski actually argues that death is the main reason for the existence of religious belief.   **Parsons: Values and Meanings:**   * Like Malinowski, Parsons (1967) sees religion helping individuals to cope with unforeseen events and uncontrollable outcomes. In addition, Parsons identifies two other essential functions that religion performs in modern society: * It creates and legitimates society’s central values - it does this by sacralising them i.e. making them sacred e.g. in the USA, Protestantism has sacralised the core American values of individualism, meritocracy and self-discipline. This serves to promote value consensus and thus social stability * It is the primary source of meaning – it answers ‘ultimate’ questions about the human condition, such as why the good suffer and why some die young. These events defy our sense of justice and make life appear meaningless, and this may undermine our commitment to society’s values. Religion provides answers to such questions e.g. by explaining suffering as a test of faith that will be rewarded in heaven. By doing so, religion enables people to adjust to adverse events or circumstances and helps maintain stability. * **However** it is difficult to relate Malinowski’s conclusions to a post-modern world. This is because his research was based on small scale, tribal societies. ☹   **Civil Religion: Bellah:**   * Like Parsons, Bellah (1991; 2013) is interested in how religion unifies society, especially a multi-faith society like America. What unifies American society is an overarching civil religion – a belief system that attaches sacred qualities to society itself. In the American case, civil religion is a faith in Americanism or ‘the American way of life’ * Bellah argues that civil religion integrates society in a way that America’s many different churches and denominations cannot. While none of these can claim the loyalty of all Americans, civil religion can. American civil religion involves loyalty to the nation-state and a belief in God, both of which are equated with being a true American. There are different rituals, symbols and beliefs including the pledge of allgiance to the flag, singing the national anthem, the Lincoln Memorial, and phrases such as ‘One Nation Under God’. However this is not a specifically Ctholic, Potestant or Jewish God, but rather an American God. Itn sacralises the American way of life and binds together Americans from manyt different ethnic and religious backgrounds.   ***Functional Alternatives***   * These are non-religious beliefs and practices that perform functions similar to those of an orgnaised religion, such as reinforcing shared values or maintaining social cohesion e.g. even though in America civil religion involves a belief in God, Bellah argues that this doesn’t have to be the case. Some other belief system could perform the same functions e.g. Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union had secular (non-religious) political beliefs and rituals around which they sought to unite society. * HOWEVER – this ignores what makes religion distinctive and different – namely, its belief in the supernatural |
| **Evaluation** |
| * The evidence of totemism is unsound. Worsley (1956) notes that there is no sharp division between the sacred and the profane, and that different clans share the same totems. And even if Durkheim is right about totemism, this does not prove that he discovered the essence of all other religions. * Durkheim’s theory may apply better to small-scale societies with a single religion. It is harder to apply it to large-scale societies, where two or more religious communities may be in conflict. His theory may explain social integration *within* communities, but not the conflicts *between* them. * Postmodernists such as Stjepan Mestrovic (2011) argue that Durkheim’s ideas cannot be applied to contemporary society, because increasing diversity has fragmented the collective conscience, so there is no longer a single shared value system for religion to reinforce. * Functionalism emphasises the social nature of religion and the positive functions it performs, but it neglects negative aspects, such as religion as a source of oppression of the poor or women * It ignores religion as a source of division and conflict, especially in complex modern societies where there is more than one religion e.g. Northern Ireland. Where there is religious pluralism (many religions), it is hard to see how it can unite people and promote integration * The idea of civil religion overcomes this problem to some extent, by arguing that societies may still have an overarching belief system shared by all – but is this really religion, especially if it is not based on belief in the supernatural? |
| **Conclusion:**   * Contemporary arguments only cloud our understanding of religious theory of society. The rise of Fundamentalism has increasingly led to greater conflict in society and in places like Afghanistan it has led to great **social change** and upheaval thus disregarding much Functionalist thought, which argues religion provides social **solidarity/harmony**. However, others have argued that Fundamentalism is a response to rapid social change and therefore supports the ideas of Malinowski, as in **times of crisis** people turn to religion to help them cope with change. * It is also difficult to use Britain as an example of Functionalism being a correct interpretation of religion’s role in society. **Secularisation** has been continuing to reduce the power of religion over British people. If only 24% of people in the UK regularly attend religious service how can it be argued that religion has a **social control** function? |