

# Religion

by Sophia



## WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, you will learn how sociological theories can be applied to the study of religion to help us better understand the role religion plays in people's lives and the way it influences society. You'll be introduced to the perspectives of several major theorists on the function and role of religion. As you learn about the role of religion in society, you'll discover how to better understand the religious differences and perspectives in the world around you. You will also explore strategies that will help you collaborate with others so you can build stronger relationships at work and in your personal life. Specifically, this lesson will cover:

## 1. Why Do Sociologists Study Religion?

Throughout history, and in societies across the world, people have used religious narratives, symbols, and traditions in an attempt to give more meaning to life and to offer a framework for understanding the universe. Some form of religion is found in every known culture, and it is usually practiced in a public way by a recognizable group. The practice of religion can include feasts and festivals, prayer to gods or other entities, marriage and funeral rites, devotional music and art, meditation or initiation, sacrifice or service, and other aspects of ritualized culture.

While some people think of religion as something individual because religious beliefs can be highly personal, religion is also a social institution. Social scientists recognize that religion exists as an organized and integrated set of beliefs, behaviors, and norms centered on basic social needs and values. Moreover, religion is a cultural universal found in all social groups.

➞ **EXAMPLE** In every culture, funeral rites are practiced in some way, although these customs vary between cultures and within religious affiliations. Despite differences, there are common elements in a ceremony marking a person's death, such as an announcement of the death, care of the deceased, disposition (e.g., cremation or burial), and ceremony or ritual.

These universals, and the differences in how societies and individuals experience and practice religion, provide rich material for sociological study.

In studying religion, sociologists distinguish between experience, belief, and ritual. Religious experience refers to the conviction or sensation that we are connected to "the divine" and might be felt when people pray or meditate. Religious beliefs are specific ideas members of a particular faith hold to be true, such as that the world was created by a deity, or that reincarnation exists. Religious rituals are behaviors, rites, or practices that are either required or expected of the members of a particular group, such as baptism, circumcision of newborns, fasting on certain days or times of year, or attending services.

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## 2. Theoretical Approaches To Religion

In the wake of nineteenth-century European industrialization and secularization, three social theorists attempted to examine the relationship between religion and society: Karl Marx, Émile Durkheim, and Max Weber.

German philosopher, journalist, and revolutionary socialist Karl Marx (1818–1883) studied the social impact of religion. He believed religion reflects the social stratification of society and that it maintains inequality and perpetuates an unjust status quo. For him, religion was just an extension of and false remedy for working-class (proletarian) economic suffering. He famously argued that religion “is the opium of the people” (1970).

French sociologist Émile Durkheim (1858–1917) defined religion as a “unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things” (1915). To him, sacred meant extraordinary—something that inspired wonder and that seemed connected to the concept of “the divine.” Durkheim argued that “religion happens” in society when there is a separation between the profane (ordinary life) and the sacred. A rock, for example, isn't sacred or profane as it exists. But if someone makes it into a headstone, or another person uses it for landscaping, it takes on different meanings—one sacred, one profane.

Durkheim is generally considered the first sociologist who analyzed religion in terms of its societal impact. Above all, he believed religion is about community: It binds people together (social cohesion), promotes behavior consistency (social control), and offers strength during life's transitions and tragedies (meaning and purpose). By applying the methods of natural science to the study of society, Durkheim held that the source of religion and morality is the collective mind-set of society and that the cohesive bonds of social order result from common values in a society. He contended that these values need to be maintained to preserve social stability.

But what would happen if religion were to decline? This question led Durkheim to posit that religion is not just a social creation but something that demonstrates the cohesive power of societal bonds: when people celebrate sacred things, they celebrate the stabilizing power of their society. By this reasoning, even if traditional religion disappeared, society wouldn't necessarily dissolve.

While Durkheim saw religion as a source of social stability, German sociologist and political economist Max Weber (1864–1920) believed it was a precipitator of social change. He examined the effects of religion on economic activities and noticed that heavily Protestant societies—such as those in the Netherlands, England, Scotland, and Germany—were the most highly developed capitalist societies and that their most successful business leaders were Protestant. In his writing *The Protestant Work Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1930), he contended that the Protestant work ethic influenced and accelerated the development of capitalism. Weber noted that certain kinds of Protestantism supported the pursuit of material gain by motivating believers to work hard, be successful, and not spend their money on frivolous things.

For Durkheim, Weber, and Marx, who were reacting to the great social and economic upheaval of the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century in Europe, religion was an integral part of society. Despite their different views, these social theorists all believed in the importance of religion to society.



BIG IDEA

For Durkheim, religion was a cohesive force that helped bind the members of society together, while Weber believed religion could be understood as something important to, but separate from, society. Marx considered religion inseparable from the economy and the worker's position within it; religion could not be understood apart from the capitalist society that perpetuated inequality.



#### BRAINSTORM

List some ways that you see religion exerting social control in the everyday world. What are some sacred items that you're familiar with? Are there some objects, such as cups, candles, or clothing, that would be considered profane in normal settings but are considered sacred in special circumstances or when used in specific ways?

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## 3. Functionalism on Religion

Modern-day sociologists often apply one of the major theoretical perspectives to their study of religion. One theoretical approach that's useful for looking at religion is functionalism, which you were introduced to in Unit 1.



#### HINT

Functionalism is the belief that society is made up of complementary organizations and structures and that those parts work together to create a larger well-functioning unit.

Functionalists contend that religion serves several functions in society. Religion, in fact, depends on society for its existence, value, and significance, and vice versa. From this perspective, religion serves several purposes, like providing answers to spiritual mysteries, offering emotional comfort, and creating a place for social interaction and social control.

In providing answers, religion defines the spiritual world and spiritual forces, including divine beings, that many humans find useful for understanding life. For example, it helps answer questions like, "How was the world created?" "Why do we suffer?" "Is there a plan for our lives?" and "Is there an afterlife?" As another function, religion provides emotional comfort in times of crisis. Religious rituals bring order, reassurance, and organization through shared familiar symbols and patterns of behavior.

One of the most important functions of religion, from a functionalist perspective, is the opportunities it creates for socializing and the formation of groups. It provides social support and offers a place to meet others who hold similar values, as well as a place to seek help (spiritual and material) in times of need. Moreover, it can foster group cohesion and integration. Because religion can be central to many people's concept of themselves, sometimes there is an "in-group" versus "out-group" feeling toward other religions in our society or within a particular practice. Religion promotes social control: it reinforces social norms such as appropriate styles of dress, following the law, conforming to gender roles, and regulating sexual behavior. But on an extreme level, the dysfunctions of this type of in-group/out-group mentality has resulted in some of the most terrible violence and oppression in human history, from the Spanish Inquisition to the Holocaust.

Another perspective on religion comes from conflict theory, which holds that society is oppressive and that people are coerced into roles that are against their best interest. Karl Marx was a conflict theorist. He was disdainful of society and saw religion as dysfunctional because it prescribes social norms that produce inequality between genders or between different castes or classes, and that diminish individual agency and choice within a religious group. Marx and other conflict theorists focus on the harm done by religion to individuals and to the world at large.



## BIG IDEA

Religion is a way to organize our values and beliefs, forming our world view, and often helping us to understand the difference between right and wrong. In some instances religion functions as a vehicle for social change. Religion is also a powerful force of contestation and of deciding which group is the “in-group” and which group is the “out-group.” Geographical boundaries have been drawn and redrawn, and nation-states created over religious differences; wars and atrocities have been perpetrated under the mantle of religion.



## Relationship Building: Skill Tip

There's no doubt that religion plays a major role in society across the world. Learning about religion strengthens your relationship building skill by providing insight into another's beliefs and values. However, it is important not to make assumptions based on others' religion. People within any given religion hold varying beliefs around topics such as politics, philosophy, and morality.



## WATCH

In the following *Sophia Stories* video, you will discover what happened when a mosque opened next door to a church in Memphis, TN.



## SUMMARY

In this lesson, you learned about the role that religion plays in society and **why sociologists study religion**. You compared the **theoretical approaches to religion** of Marx, Durkheim, and Weber, as well as that of conflict theory and **functionalism on religion**. There is no single interpretation for why religion continues to be a powerful force in society, but there are several important overlapping explanations.

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## REFERENCES

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