**NOTES ON SOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES OF RELIGIOUS AND MORAL EDUCATION ( EBS 279)**

**INTRODUCTION**

Religion plays a very crucial role in society, as it helps to address a number of social issues. A number of sociologists have used sociological theories to explain some religious phenomena. This course seeks to address a number of sociological issues that affect people in society. These issues relate to the family, politics and the economy, among others. Sociologists like Karl Marx, Emile Durkheim and Max Weber will be discussed, and their contributions to sociology of religion will be examined.

**MEANING AND NATURE OF RELIGION**

Religion has been dominant concern of humankind. It is very difficult to define or describe

religion because it is a growing, dynamic thing, elemental, personal and broad in scope.

Religion, however comes from the Latin word *‘religio’* (to bind). Literally speaking, religion is a

principle of unification and harmonization. It represents a binding relationship between human beings and the sacred or an object of worship.

Many different definitions have been proposed. William James defines religion as “The feeling, acts and experiences of individual men in their solitude so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine.”

Hoffoding defines religion as, “the conservation of values.” Again according to Alexander

“Religion is faith in deity”. To Patric “Religion is the consciousness of our practical relation to

an invisible spiritual order.” “Religion”, says Whitehead, “is the vision of something which

stands beyond, behind, and within, the passing flux of immediate things.” W.T Stace defined

“religion as the hunger of the soul for the impossible, the unattainable, the inconceivable.”

According to Kant “Religion is a matter of the will, it being understood and identified with

practical reason, that is to say certain acts ought to be done or that certain attitudes ought to be

adopted.” Religion is described by Durant Drake in these words: “This disposition of the heart and will, through which man comes to care of the highest things and to live in gentleness and inward calm above the surface aspects and accidents of life, we call, in its inner nature, spirituality; when it is embodied in outward forms and institutions, and spreads among the whole communities, we call it a religion.”

To Swami Vivekananda, religion is not in doctrines, in dogmas nor in intellectual argumentation; it is being and becoming, it is realization.

The Concise *Oxford Dictionary* defines; religion as “human recognition of a superhuman controlling power and especially of a personal God or gods entitled to obedience and worship”

In view of the diverse definitions by different people, one would agree with Ninian Smart on a description of religion focusing on dimensions. Thus Smart (1989) identifies seven dimensions of religion in his book, ‘The World’s Religions’. These dimensions are as follows:

* The Practical and ritual Dimension
* The Experiential and Emotional Dimension
* The Narrative or Mythic Dimension
* The Doctrinal and Philosophical Dimension
* The Ethical and Legal Dimension
* The Social and Institutional Dimension
* The Material Dimension

**MEANING OF SOCIOLOGY**

The word sociology was coined by the French Philosopher-Sociologist, Auguste Comte in 1837 (Peil:1977). Comte combined the Latin word “socio” (meaning society) with the Greek word “logy”(meaning science) to arrive at the term sociology which he defines as the science of society. Sociology therefore is the scientific study of human, environmental, material and ideological components of society. It analyses human ideas, behavior, grouping, organizations, administration, law, crime and punishment. Human problems of hunger, disease, homelessness, unemployment, ignorance, divorce and violence therefore engage the attention of Sociologist.

The founding fathers of Sociology are Auguste Comte, Herbert Spencer, Emile Durkheim, Max Weber and Talcott Parsons. All these founding fathers have their peculiar ideas Sociology.

**Auguste Comte**: Comte was of the opinion that sociology should focus on social statics and social dynamics. Social statics refers to structures and functions of subsystems, institutions and persons. Social dynamics refers to the changes occasioned to institutions over time. The task of sociologists is therefore to make understandable the fundamental laws of nature and why people behave the way they do under different prevailing conditions. **Comte formulated the law of three stages of societal growth i.e theological, metaphysical and scientific.** The ***theological*** stage is the primitive or preliterate state where the powers of priest and the clergy dominated human society and explanations to events were purely religious. The ***metaphysical*** stage marks the period of enlightenment and reformation as well as reasoning. People began to seriously challenge the religious explanations for social phenomenon. The enlightenment scholars were pre-occupied with seeking answers to questions of nature through reasoning based on overt facts. The ***scientific stage*** is the stage of individual revolution and scientific discoveries as well as technological growth and development.

**Herbert Spencer**: Herbert Spencer regard sociology as the study of society and likens society to a biological organism with interdependent but inter-related parts functioning independently and interdependently so as to ensure the survival of the entire system. Society as a system has subsystems comprising of institutions and persons with status and roles necessary for their existence and survival.

**Emile Durkheim** : Durkheim considers the network of human relationship and societal growth as progressing from a simple undifferentiated form. Societal development is from homogeneous

to highly differentiated or complex forms of industrial society. To Durkheim, society is a moral entity that is external to the individual but coerces his compliance through belief system into a moral community of adherents.

**Karl Marx** : Karl Marx was equally concerned with the nature of human society and focused largely on the role of conflict in human societies that are highly stratified along class dimensions. The existence of classes in human societies makes conflict over material resources inevitable. Marx contended that all human societies have progressed from primitive communism, to slavery, to feudalism and to capitalism characterized by high exploitation. The continued exploitation of the masses will lead to the overthrow of the bourgeoisie, resulting in socialism, a classless and egalitarian society.

***Max Weber***: Weber considers sociology as dealing with the study of organizations and the role of ideas in the development of human society. He contended that modern contemporary societies are being organized especially along bureaucratic dimensions as demonstrated by

his theory of Bureaucracy. The role of ideas is also significant in transforming the societies as was demonstrated in the protestant ethics and the spirit of capitalism. Weber has also drawn the attention of sociologists to the study of power and authority relationships in the society which he

called domination. He argued that legitimated power results in authority which leads to three types of domination. These are *legal or rational*, ***traditional*** and ***charismatic*** domination. Rational domination is the basis for modern bureaucracies with definite hierarchical arrangements and structures as well as functions. The traditional domination is through customs and traditions, while that of charismatic is through gift of grace or extra-ordinary qualities of the individual or person.

**Parsons**: He was concerned with human behavior in the society which he christened social action. It is known as social action analysis which sociologists should also concern themselves with. Parsons therefore classify human behavior based on motivations for human action. He describes human behavior as been determined by the motives of the actor. Parsons further argued that for society to survive and develop it requires functional prerequisites. These are identified to include; pattern maintenance, tension management, goal attainment, adaptation to environment and integration of the various components.

**Factors that necessitated the emergence of Sociology**

Before the Comtian era, Greek and Roman philosophers of old had reflected intellectually on the societies of their time. Notably among these social philosophers were Thomas Hobbe, John Locke and Jean Jacques Rosseau who focused their attention on the question of political and social life of the people. They examined the basis of the organization and administration of society, as well as the relationship between government and citizens. During the enlightenment era, violent revolutions became widespread in Europe. Notable among these revolutions were those of Germany, Britain, Italy and France. German unification brought wars in the country that revolutionaries the nation. The English revolution brought about by conflict between king James 1 and parliament in the 17th Century brought many changes in Great Britain. Before the revolution, it was the church that crowned the kings and gave them the supreme political power over the kingdoms. These positions, the revolution challenged vigorously and sought to change. There was also the French revolution in 1789 which saw the violent overthrow of king Louis xviii and the subsequent strengthening of parliament. The major demands of the French revolutionaries were liberty, equality and fraternity. These developments notwithstanding, the major event that shaped the emergence and development of sociology was the industrial revolution in Britain. The industrial revolution brought about widespread changes which made people to ask fundamental questions about life and society generally. Among the changes that occur were the disruption that accompanied the industrialization process; societies becoming more chaotic and the pollution to environment emanating from industrial by products.

Peasant migration from rural to urban towns for factory employment was witnessed. There was also the rise of cities with its anonymity. Also the collapse of religion as a source of moral authority, the demise of the old view of social order as ordained by God and the rise of explanations based on science change events. These changes occurring in traditional European societies necessitated the impetus that encouraged the emergence of sociology as a scientific discipline. The emergence of sociology was further aided by the currency and popularity of the evolutionist theory of Charles Darwin (1859) which traced the history of all species of plants and animals from their earliest origins. The influence of Darwinic organic or biological evolution theory led such social philosophers as Herbert Spencer in England who sought to understand the developments of human society to apply the theory of organic evolution to human society. Other pioneers in the development of sociology included Lester Ward, an American who published his dynamic sociology in 1883. In this work Lester Ward advocated social progress through social action guided by sociologist.

Two other factors facilitated the development of sociology as a discipline. The first been its adoption of the scientific method of investigation in the study of social behavior. Sociology emerge as a scientific discipline using all the principles and methods of investigation

as found in the other pure sciences of chemistry, physics, Biology etc. Auguste Comte was very zealous about developing science for the society and was instrumental in the development of rules of sociological method. The other factor for the development of sociology was the exposure of Europeans to the radically different societies of Africa, Asia and the Americans whose exposure revealed that different societies were at different levels of development. This difference they believe called for analysis and explanation.

Sociology attained the status of an independent academic discipline in 1892 with the establishment of the Department of Sociology at the University of Chicago, United States of America. In Africa, the first Department of Sociology was established at the University of Ghana in 1951. In 1895, the American Journal of Sociology was established to publish and document research and intellectual works of sociologists. By 1905, the American sociological society, a professional body of practitioners in the field of sociology came into existence.

**Definition and Subject Matter of Sociology of Religion**

Sociology of Religion is the study of the Society from a religious perspective. It is the systematic study of societal variables from a religious view. Sociology of religion therefore is interested in understanding the extent of involvement, participation and contribution religion has made in

patterning and providing direction in the society. It is interested in studying the extent to which religion has brought about change and development in the society. Sociology of Religion also examines the historical development of religion, its origin and the various forms religious beliefs have taken over time. Sociology of religion seeks to understand the impact of religion on the individual as well as institutions of the society. It tries to understand the impact of religion on families, marriages, politics, technology and development in a society. Thus, the sociologist of religion studies the entire society paying particular attention to human interactions, relationships, beliefs, norms and values among the various religious groups in the society. Sociologists of religion study social aggregates, groups and organizations as well as institutions, law and crime

as they relate to religion. The discipline study conflict, deviance and tries to undertake research that will enhance peace, order and stability in the society.

**Summary**

Sociology is the scientific study of the society. The discipline emerged out of the desire to understand the chaotic nature of the society following the industrial revolution in Britain. The concern of early sociologists therefore was to maintain order and stability in the society.

Sociology of Religion as one of the sub-disciplines of sociology is concerned with studying society from a religious perspective. The course is interested in understanding the degree to which religion impacts on the society generally.