14.1B: The Elements of Religion

A conventional social scientific view understands religion as a group’s collective beliefs and rituals relating to the supernatural.

Learning Objectives

• Identify the different elements that comprise religion

Key Points

• Sacred refers to collective interests within different religious practices. Profane acts include individual concerns that are not part of religious rituals.
• Emile Durkheim argues that religion is composed of the sacred elements of social life. However, many see this definition as too broad, since there are many collective interests that most do not consider religious.
• Ritual is an everyday practice that resembles symbolic meaning in different religions.
• Other social scientists view religion as any attempt to answer existential questions. Many also consider this too broad a definition.
• A third social scientific perspective views religion as the collective beliefs and rituals of a group relating to the supernatural. Though not without criticisms, this categorization most closely adheres to the traditional and popular view of what constitutes a religion.

Key Terms

• supernatural: Above nature; that which is beyond or added to nature, often so considered because it is given by
God or some force beyond that which humans are born with. In Roman Catholic theology, sanctifying grace is considered to be a supernatural addition to human nature.

- **profane**: Not sacred or holy, unconsecrated; relating to non-religious matters, secular.
- **sacred**: Set apart by solemn religious ceremony; especially, in a good sense, made holy; set apart to religious use; consecrated; not profane or common; as, a sacred place; a sacred day; sacred service

Emile Durkheim argues that religion is comprised of the sacred elements of social life. Durkheim also identifies collective interests and group unity as part of the sacred, whereas individual concerns fall into the profane category. This distinction makes sense when we think about western religious traditions where, for example, the Torah and Bible are considered holy books treated with reverence and respect. Problems quickly emerge, however, when we think about nationalism or consumerism. Under Durkheim’s distinction, both nationalism and consumerism would be considered sacred practices.

The reverence afforded to the U.S. constitution, cars, shoes and former presidents clearly constitutes the sacred and thus religious, though the vast majority of U.S. religious practitioners would disagree that they are members of multiple faith traditions. As a result, some have argued Durkheim’s distinction is not sufficiently narrow to capture the essence of religion. If we want to examine the difference between collective and individual interests, Durkheim’s distinction steers us in the right direction.

Other social scientists view religion as any attempt to answer existential questions, i.e. “is there life after death” and “how does the universe work and what’s my role in it.” This categorization of religion highlights its functional role as serving specific social ends. In doing so, however, this perspective also attracts criticisms for being overly encompassing. Many branches of scientific investigation, for instance, would be considered religious, and even atheism would fit into the frame of attempting to answer existential questions.

A third social scientific perspective views religion as the collective beliefs and rituals of a group relating to the
supernatural. If we simply focus on beliefs relating to the supernatural, this too may be broad enough to include atheism. However, when belief and rituals of a group relating to the supernatural are coupled together, the scope seems appropriately narrowed. Though not without criticisms, this categorization most closely adheres to the traditional and popular view of what constitutes a religion.

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