



Religion

11

Learning Objectives

After having read chapter 11, you will be able to

- describe the social Darwinist approach to analysing religion.
- outline Émile Durkheim's sociological approach to understanding religion.
- explain the relationship between religion and capitalism as outlined by Max Weber.
- discuss Karl Marx's critical stance on religion.
- summarize central trends pertaining to religion in Canadian society.
- illustrate the relationship between religion, family life and gender roles using specific examples.
- critically discuss the role of religion in colonialism and the forced assimilation of Indigenous peoples in Canada.

Chapter Summary

Aristotle provided one of the earliest analyses of religion. He argued that a hierarchical society with a powerful leader would likely have in its religion a commanding authority figure whereas egalitarian societies believe in a spiritual society of gods with egalitarian relationships with one another and with human beings. He suggested that the gods we worship are a mirror reflecting our own social structures and our own cultural beliefs, values, and ideals. We see this pattern in the context of the colonization of First Nations peoples in Canada. For example, the French Jesuits had a king, and spoke of an omnipotent “God,” both viewed as masters whose commands their servants were to obey. In contrast, the Huron (Wendat) nation viewed their political leaders as role models and their spiritual figures as those who inspired them through visions or plagued them with curses. The Huron had a much more egalitarian relationship with those who inhabited the spirit world.

By the late nineteenth century, **social Darwinism** more explicitly linked religion to society. According to this view, “primitive” peoples worship dark but powerless gods. The fact that Europeans had a single supreme ruler was evidence that they had evolved beyond the “primitive barbarians.” This approach to religion was then invoked by colonizers to convert perceived pagans to Christianity.

Max Weber attempted to explain the rise of modern capitalism with his theory of the **Protestant work ethic**, which linked religion with social class. This theory was based on the Protestant belief that only some people—a predestined elect—would be saved during the second coming of Christ. Protestants believed that a person's ability to work hard and achieve material success was a sign that he or she was favoured by God. Thus, religious and cultural influences spurred people to accumulate wealth, thereby giving rise to capitalism.

Weber's German contemporary Karl Marx had a more critical view of religious doctrine. He theorized that religion was an instrument of **hegemony** and mainly served the interests of members of the ruling class, who used religion to dissuade workers from organizing around their own class interests to challenge inequality. Marx used the term **false consciousness** to describe the belief among the working classes that the class-based hierarchy was a God-given and therefore just order, that God determined each individual's appropriate position in the class hierarchy, and that oppressed workers would be rewarded in the afterlife.

Émile Durkheim's work on religion highlighted the **moral community** and religion's social functions. Durkheim posited that social phenomena such as suicide and religion were rooted in the group or society, not the individual—in other words, religion is deeply social. According to Durkheim, there are three central elements of religion. The first is the equation *god=society*. Using the Aborigines of Australia as a model, Durkheim suggested that different groups' **totems** symbolize both the god and the society that reveres it. The second element of religion, according to Durkheim, is **collective consciousness**, or a shared understanding among followers of a particular religion brought about by shared experiences and rituals. An example of collective consciousness is the call to prayer by the Muzzin, which is followed by the deep bowing by those in attendance, who are all dressed similarly. The third element of religion that Durkheim distinguished was the difference between acts and objects that are **sacred** (set apart as being positively regarded, holy, and deserving of respect, sometimes forbidden or taboo) and those that are **profane** (more ordinary and secular). Sacred objects include prayer beads or flags, and sacred acts include prayer and keeping kosher. Durkheim argued that no objects or acts are inherently sacred. Rather they are defined as such by social groups.

Religion in Canada can be examined by looking at changes in demographic trends. In Canada, growing or declining immigration from certain regions has contributed to the expansion of certain religious groups and a shrinking of others, respectively. In 2001, the census showed growth for Pagan, Muslim, Christian (not reported elsewhere), Serbian Orthodox, Hindu, Sikh, or Buddhist religious affiliations. Other religions reported decreases, such as Presbyterian and Anglican, in large part because immigration to Canada from Scotland and Britain has decreased. Still, these long-established Protestant denominations continue to have among the highest numbers of adherents. It is also important to note that an increasing number of Canadians claims not to have any religious affiliation at all.

Studies show that young people are consistently less interested in religion than older people; however, it would be a mistake to assume that these same young people today will not (re)turn to religion later in life. In other words, age group differences do not indicate cohort differences. Religious groups whose members are the oldest are the ones fastest declining, while those with the youngest members are the fastest growing.

Religion has been used either to create and nurture strong family ties or to disrupt or break them. An example of the former is found within Hutterite communities across Canada, which remain agri-

cultural and set apart from mainstream society. Examples of the latter can be found in the removal of Irish and British children from unwed mothers, many of whom were believed to be sex workers; the removal and forced transport to Australia of poor children from their parents in Britain; and the institution of residential schools for Indigenous children in Canada.

Most organized world religions are characterized by **androcentrism** and patriarchal power structures, which tend to subordinate and marginalize women. For that reason, feminists in the 1960s and 1970s became critical of Christianity and its practices, which they viewed as an influential cultural factor in the reproduction of gender inequality. Among the Hutterites, for example, all community decisions are made by men, particularly by the Head Minister, and the community is structured around a strict gendered division of labour, where the women care for children and elders, and the men care for crops and livestock and make decisions.

For the past half-century, the Anglican Church has been opposing the ordination of women into church leadership roles. In November 1976, the first six women were ordained as Anglican priests in Canada, but it was not until 1994 that the first Canadian woman was ordained as a Bishop. As of 2013, only 15 of the 38 Anglican provinces have allowed the ordination of women bishops, and only five, including Canada, actually have one. The Roman Catholic Church, as well as a number of fundamentalist Christian groups, remains opposed to women holding leadership roles. Most of this resistance appears to stem from the negative and patriarchal attitudes toward women expressed in early Christian teachings.

Although religion is often thought to have traditional and conservative views toward social change, it has been the primary agent of social change. In many instances, religion has been used in detrimental and oppressive ways. For example, religion has been used to submit populations to the will of authority in the context of colonialism and convert Indigenous peoples to Christianity. The primary goal of missionaries is to change people and they often practice **aid evangelism**, which means that missionaries tend to focus on developing countries that need financial help. When financial aid comes with strings attached, we speak of **tied aid** or **phantom aid**, which means that the aid provided is not real, but rather a form of investment. However, religion, particularly **liberation theology**, has also been the driving force behind anti-colonial liberation movements, anti-racism and anti-discrimination movements, anti-poverty struggles, and democratic reform. Gandhi, Mother Theresa, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Malcom X all have used their faith and religion to advocate for social change and social justice.

Study Questions

1. What are the three central elements of all religions, according to Émile Durkheim? Briefly explain each of these elements.
2. How did Max Weber explain the role of religion in the development of modern capitalism?
3. Explain the role of religion as a form of social control as outlined by Karl Marx. Make reference to concepts such as hegemony and false consciousness in your discussion.

4. How have androcentrism and sexism permeated religious practices and beliefs? Provide two specific examples. How could this be changed?
5. How and why have women been denied full participation in many Christian churches?
6. Why have certain religious groups such as Pagan, Muslim, “Christian not included,” Sikh, and Hindu increased in population percentages while others such as Anglican and Presbyterian have gone down in numbers? Include the median age of each group in your discussion and explain how this may impact the statistics.
7. How were residential schools used by religious institutions to sever Indigenous family ties and what have been the long-term effects of this?

Exploration and Discussion Exercises

1. View a religious program such as Benny Hinn. Discuss what politics permeate the programming. How does the host appear to and appeal to his or her audience? What are the messages, both overt and covert?
2. Research how women have been regarded in two different religions. It could be, for example, Christianity and Hinduism, or Islam and Judaism. Discuss the similarities and differences in women’s experiences.

Further Readings

Ruby, T.F. (2006). Listening to the Voices of Hijab. *Women’s Studies International Forum* 29(1): 54–66.

This article presents empirical research that explores the meaning of wearing hijab has for Muslim women.

Government of Canada: Freedom of Religion and Religious Symbols in the Public Sphere

<http://www.lop.parl.gc.ca/content/lop/researchpublications/2011-60-e.htm>

This website discusses the legal regulation of religious practices in different cultural contexts

Inside Bountiful: Polygamy Investigation: <http://globalnews.ca/video/398600/inside-bountiful-polygamy-investigation>

Polygamy is prohibited in Canada by the Criminal Code, but it is still practised by a small Fundamentalist Mormon community in Bountiful, British Columbia. This documentary explores the community’s claim that polygamy is a religious practice, which is a fundamental freedom protected under the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

Sons of Perdition:

http://www.sonsofperditionthemovie.com/Sons_of_Perdition_Home.html

This film tells the story of young men who have been banished from their fundamentalist Mormon, polygamist communities for a variety of reasons.

The Virgin Daughters: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zofpxsiA_R0

This documentary follows fathers and their daughters as they prepare for the girls' "purity ball."

Cure for Love: https://www.nfb.ca/film/cure_for_love/

This documentary explores the controversial evangelical movement of converting gay people to heterosexuality by means of religious conversion.

The Last Days of the Okak: https://www.nfb.ca/film/last_days_of_okak/

This short documentary tells the story of an Inuit settlement in northern Labrador and the impact Moravian missionaries had on the community.