THE MOTIVE AND METHOD OF THE SOCIOLOGICAL STUDY OF RELIGION

Etim E. Okon*

*Senior Lecturer, Department of Religious and Cultural Studies, University of Calabar, Nigeria

ABSTRACT
The purpose of this paper is to analyze the fundamental concern of sociologists on religion. This study investigates the peculiar interest of sociologists on religion. Religion both as a social phenomenon and as a universal need of human society must be understood. Sociological interpretations are based on empirical evidence. Images of social reality are subjected to experimental evidence. Scientific objectivity means that it is not the duty of the sociologist to evaluate, endorse, or condemn the content of religious belief. The sociological inquiry on religion does not involve the personal opinion of the researcher. Sociologists have described scientific objectivity variously as agnostic neutrality, academic morality and methodological atheism. The sociological perspective treats religious belief dispassionately as objects of study. In this paper, we have identified the fundamental concern of sociologists on religion both as a social institution and as an academic discipline.

KEYWORDS: Religious studies, religion and society, scientific objectivity, empirical study.

INTRODUCTION

Of all the social institutions, religion is the most misunderstood. Religion emerges and exists in a social context. It is one of the most influential pervasive forces in human society. Religion shapes the nature of interpersonal relationships. Human actions in many societies are motivated by religious beliefs and values. Religion is a vital aspect of social life. To the outsiders, religion is a dispensable superstition and a major obstacle and distraction to social progress.
For the insiders, religion is a positive social experience that produces moral values, courage, altruism, urbanity and brotherhood. We are yet to see any human society without religious consciousness among its members. The peculiar concern of sociologists is the relationship between social phenomena, the meanings people have and the consequences of these meanings for the individual and the society (McGuire 1992:1-6). Sociologists study social consequences, especially the way belief systems and religious institutions influence social experience (Andersen 1997:224, 225; O'Donnell 1992:400; Giddens, Duneier and Appelbaum 2003:528, 529; Bibby 2001:118). The sociological perspective therefore views religion from the human (social) aspect of religious belief in its practical dimension. All aspects of religious experience are interpreted through available symbols that conform to culturally validated interpretations.

In the application of scientific methodology, sociologists investigate social reality from what can be perceived through the senses. Religious people have argued consistently that what is known through the senses is a little part of a greater reality that can be known, only through faith (Bibby 2001:118). Sociologists do not have any acceptable means to prove or disprove religious doctrines. In the words of Max Weber "The essence of religion is not a concern of sociologists, we make it our task to study the conditions and effects of a particular type of social behaviour" (1963:1).

Giddens, Duneier and Appelbaum (2003: 528) posits that academic study of religion is a challenging enterprise on sociological imagination. "We must confront ideas that seek the eternal, while recognizing that religious groups also promote quite mundane goals, such as acquiring money or followers. We need to recognize the diversity of religious beliefs and modes of conduct, but also probe into the nature of religion as a general phenomenon". For sociologists, religion is a cultural system of commonly shared beliefs and rituals that provides a sense of ultimate meaning and purpose by creating an idea of reality that is sacred, all compassing and supernatural (Giddens, Duneier and Appelbaum 2003:528).

**SOCILOGY AS THE SCIENCE OF THE SOCIAL ORDER**

Sociology is the science of society. It is the study of human societies. Sociology is particularly concerned with the study of human interaction and social organization. Sociology formulates and corroborates theories and generalizations concerning the influences people exercise on one another. As a discipline, sociology began in the nineteenth century in France, Germany and the America. The name "sociology" was coined by the celebrated French scholar, Auguste Comte (1798 - 1857). Comte as a philosopher and founder of the school of philosophy called Positivism wanted a new discipline that will produce a rational religion for humanity, such that traditional religion and the ideology of the French revolution could be repudiated. Comte who was a conservative was worried over the impact of that revolution in France and other countries.

Comte was a strong believer in law and order and the basic purpose of sociology was to discover the laws of the social order. Comte hated Christianity and regarded it as a retarding force in human history. He had exorbitant expectations for science. Through sociology, Comte had wanted to develop a scientific body of knowledge about human societies, consisting of (1) a
theory of social interaction (i.e., a theory to explain the cohesion of societies), and (2) a theory of societal progress or evolution. Comte had anticipated a transition from traditional social philosophy to modern sociology. Comte's vision was popularized by the famous English scholar, Herbert Spencer (1820 - 1903). Spencer's preoccupation was the symbiosis between societal evolution and organic evolution, following Darwin's theory. The most fertile academic soil for the new discipline was in America, where leading universities established professorial chairs for a scientific study of society. Within the period between the two world wars, sociology was more of an American enterprise. American sociologists became more concerned with contemporary society. Empirical research was carried on in the studies of local communities and social problems like crime, delinquency, poverty, social inequality, illegitimacy, social adjustment and divorce.

Some of the perennial and inevitable questions which agitate the mind of scholars in humanities and social sciences include; the purpose of society and modes of social behavior and interaction. While some scholars are of the opinion that it is the individual alone that have objective existence and that social organizations, including society itself, are mere abstractions, others steer the middle path and hold that society as a network of institutions is a creation of man, to that extent society cannot exist without the individual and the individual cannot survive without the society. Society is indispensable to man, and man is indispensable to society. It is a relationship of mutual dependence and interdependence.

Human societies are a conglomerate of various groups and organizations which are regulated by normative prescriptions (O'Brien, Schrag and Martin 1964:409). The regulation of social activities, enable people to increase their potential and prospects to achieve set goals and objectives. Social activities are classified into jurisdiction based on functions. O'Brien, Schrag and Martin (1964: 409) have defined social institution as: “... configuration of prescriptions, beliefs, and practices that are regarded as being essential for the maintenance of society, its structure, and its basic values. Institutions that come readily to mind are the family, religion, government, education, and the economy. Each has a distinctive task to perform”. All the social institutions are interrelated. Interdependence is necessary for the smooth operation of institutions. Autonomy of any institution is interpreted as social disequilibrium, or lack of balance.

**SOCILOGY OF RELIGION: A BRIEF HISTORY**

Sociology of religion was not altogether a new phenomenon in the intellectual history of mankind. Birnbaum and Lenzer (1969: 1) have said that there is no discipline without its precursors, and that ideas which reflected the sociological perspective on religion existed as far back as classical antiquity in the speculations of pre-Socratics “as well as the views on religion elaborated by Lucretius. There is the nominalist tradition in medieval European philosophy and Muslim thought. And there are the skeptical reflections on religion of Machiavelli” .By the end of 17th century, there was a, paradigm shift in the philosophical modes and categories of thought that paved the way for secularization of thought. The entire process of secularization culminated into the evolution and development of the social sciences from the turn
of the 18th century and throughout the 19th century. Birnbaum and Lenzer writes: “In a world in which all phenomena could be seen as man-made and without any transcendent originator or causation, the emergence of the social sciences in general and the sociology of religion in particular represented one of the most momentous developments in the process of secularization” (1969:1).

Following World War 1, there was a shift in the focus of interest, from evolutionary perspective to the structural-functional approach. It was through the structural-functional approach that sociologists developed interest in the new branch of sociology called 'sociology of religion'. Sociology of religion studies the impact of religion in the society. It is a study of interactions between religion and other institutions of society. Sociology of religion deals with religion as a human universal. It studies the functions of religion in human society. It takes particular interest in how religion influences human behaviour. It shows how religion helps man to cope with the crisis of life. Although sociology of religion does not ignore the functions of religion to the individuals, its particular area of focus is on how religion functions for groups, or collectivity of society. It covers the interaction between religion and society, culture, social change, stratification, status and social solidarity. Sociology of religion does not only study the positive impact of religion on society, but also the dysfunction of religion in human society.

As a social science, sociology of religion studies how religion is responding to the frustration of people within a given society. It examines how socio-cultural, economic and political realities of a given community can influence religion and vice-versa. Sociology of religion studies the motivations and causal factors of sect development; it studies the origin, doctrine, membership status, leadership and organization of a particular religious group in the society. Sociology of religion studies the impact of religious conviction on national development. For the sociologist of religion, religion is just a social institution like law, politics, economics, morality and culture. It performs some function within the social system.

THE SOCIAL FUNCTIONS OF RELIGION

Functionalism either as a theory or doctrine, stresses utility or purpose. All functions in human society have natural or intended purpose. Much has been written on the concept of function in social sciences and humanities. The first systematic formulation of the concept was by Emile Durkheim. Durkheim postulated that the "function" of a social institution is the correspondence between it and the needs of the social system (1965:10). In interpreting Durkheim's view, A. R. Radcliffe-Brown substituted the terms "needs" (that is besoins in French), with the terms "necessary conditions of existence" (1952:178). The implication is that there are necessary conditions of existence for human societies which proper scientific enquiry will reveal. For purpose of clarity, scholars have analogically compared social life with organic life. As animal organism represents an agglomeration of cells and interstitial fluids as an integrated whole, even so, the human society is an integrated system of complex institutions. Radcliffe-Brown writes: "The continuity of the social structure, like that of an organic structure, is not destroyed by changes in units. Individuals may leave the society by death or otherwise;
others may enter it” (1952:180). Durkheim and Radcliff-Brown insisted that the social life of the community is the functioning of the social structure. Radcliffe-Brown was also of the opinion that the concept of function involves: “...the notion of a set of relations amongst unit entities, the continuity of the structure being maintained by a life process, made up of the activities of the constituent units” (1952:180).

Function therefore connotes the contribution which a particular institution makes to the total social life. The social system which implies the total social structure of a society depends on the totality of its social usages for continued existence. Society generally requires some level of functional unity if it must survive. Functionalism is a situation in which all the component parts of the social system work together without opposition which cannot be resolved. Otherwise, organized and regulated antagonism is an essential feature of every social system. The sociologist is very curious to know the social functions of religion in human society and the overall impact of religion on social life.

Religion sacralizes the norms and values of society. It venerates and deifies the moral principles of society. It brings added sanction to morality. "If it is believed that a breach of moral law is followed by disastrous consequences, perhaps for the whole community, then this belief will act as a powerful deterrent" (Lewis 1969:148). John Lewis has said that religion can lead the society to believe that the rules of morality have been promulgated by supernatural powers and that will create added sanctity (1969:148). Religious feast and ceremonies are instruments of social solidarity. Religion brings people together in joy and fellowship.

Religion equips man with functional principles for his moral life. Through various ethical codes, religion has been the leading factor in socialization and traditional education. Edward Dayton (1984:87) has this to say: “Religion bestows on man and society the sense of the sacred…. The sacred seems to lie in the domain of the church, or at least in religion... it is the sacred that gives meaning to life, all life”. The loss of the sacred could render life shallow, uncreative, artificial and a purposeless boredom. N.S.S. Iwe has said that a healthy society needs the sense of the sacred which religion instils and that it is through religion that people can cope with the riddles, puzzles and human mysteries like “dreams, accidents, birth and death, plagues, earthquakes and other ecological and natural disasters, innocent suffering and various forms of injustice and evil. Man and his society cannot stand for long meaninglessness and ignorance in matters intimately affecting human life” (Religion, Morality and Ethics 1992:9).

Some scholars prefer to describe the sacred as the 'numinous' or 'the spooky'. Numinousis derived from the Roman numen, which to the Romans was a vague feeling of awe, amazement and thrill. On the social functions of numen, John Lewis writes: “The numen presided over marriage, over agriculture, over the domestic health, over each man's person. It is formless, sexless, and cannot be represented, nor does it need a temple or status” (1969:173). The numen was not only mysterious and weird; it was also imposing, horrifying and monstrous. Among the Egyptians, the idea of the sacred was represented by the term maat. Maat means right order. Berger and Berger (1976:29) avers thus: “This right order extends from the world of the gods to the world of men, embracing birth in one all-enveloping meaning. The gods
act in accordance with maat in the way they run the universe. To be in conformity with maat is to be in proper communion with the gods”.

Religion affords man a forum to celebrate life and achieve a linkage with the supernatural. It is through religion that man celebrates the various rites of passage like birth, adulthood, marriage, child dedication, death, burial and reincarnation rituals. It is also through religion that man appeases the divine through sacrifices, worship and prayers. Ekpunobi and Ezeaku (1990:33) have this to say: “Sacrifice is a system attempting to establish a relationship between the visible and invisible worlds. Material things are offered to the spirit worlds. It is believed that the spirits consume the essence or ‘life’ of the victim offered while human beings participate in sharing the material part or the meat”. Thus, it is through religion that man can eat with God in the anthropomorphic sense. It is only religion that can lead man into such realm.

Throughout human history, from antiquity to modern times, religion has been the repository and custodian of human and social value. Iwe has argued that the functions of religion as the guardian of the social order do not mean that religion is all the time hostile to change: “As religion plays its priestly conservative and stabilizing role, it stands as an indispensable agent of social control, functioning as the custodian and defender of established norms and values in all human arenas, personal and spiritual, domestic and political, social and cultural against all threats and violations” (1992:7, 8).

Religion provides man with a sense of another life. It is through religion that man is given reasonable explanation for death, and life after death. This is the eschatological functions of religion. Through religion man is given a reliable hope and promise of eternal life in the anticipated kingdom of God. Religion reminds man of divine justice; God will punish the wicked and reward the righteous. The primary purpose of religion is to make sense out of existence, positive or negative. Kelly writes: “Man is an inveterate meaning monger. He tries to make sense out of his experience, even if he has to resort to nonsense to do it ... His mind finds patterns in his experience” (1972:38). Religion provides man with a mechanism to tackle the uncertainties of life. Man is always visited by unforeseeable circumstances which create anxiety and even mental torture.

When man is faced with problems which he cannot identify religion provides a framework for interpretation. Meaning has to do with inner, symbolic interpretation of reality. It is an expression of ultimate values. Social values consist of notions of right, or wrong actions. Values are moral judgments of voluntary actions. While some judgments are made by isolated individuals in opposition against the entire society, others are collective that is, held in common by members of a particular group, or society.

The central concern of sociology of religion is the link between ultimate meanings and the meanings of everyday life. Sociology of religion is only interested in collective meanings. It was through the works of Max Weber that sociologists paid due attention to the latent meanings of social action. It was Weber's considered opinion that a good understanding of social action involves an objective interpretation of the motives and intentions of the participants. Values are
special category of meaning. Peter Berger has described meanings as "definitions of reality".

“Just as individuals participating in a social situation jointly define what that situation means, so entire society will produce definitions of the overall reality of human life, and these definitions of reality serve as the taken-for-granted context of all social situation in that society” (1967:368).

Definitions of reality could be either normative or cognitive. Normatively, it reveals what reality ought to be, and cognitively, what reality is in essence. The quest for values and ultimate meaning is properly classified as man's primordial necessity. It is no luxury, it has to be met. Since we pride ourselves of being a civilized society, it is incumbent on us to be tolerant, openminded, equalitarian and sensitive to individual differences, rights and convictions. The quest for meaning cannot be reduced to mere superstition, or primitive drive. It is more than that. Kelly writes: “Man has a deep craving to make coherent sense of his life within a framework of ultimate meanings…. We have seen that the mechanism, by which such ultimate meanings are developed, embodied, propagated, and maintained is the religious movement or organization” (1972:154).

Objectively, ultimate meanings must have correspondence with real-life-situation. Man as a meaning-oriented being is confronted by fundamental questions. The oldest of such question is: "How can I survive?" This has to do with the basic wants of mankind, which includes: food, water, clothing, shelter and medication. Religion may not resolve this directly. This can be resolved through science and technology. Man can make a living through farming, hunting, fishing, trading et cetera. It is man's duty to affect his environment and harness its natural resources and live a happy life. Man does not necessarily need to be religious before he can fend for his livelihood (Kelly 1972:39,40).

CONCLUSION

Sociology as the science of society cannot ignore the pervasive influence of religion. Sociologists who study religion are not interested in the truth, or falsity of a religious belief system. Sociologists as scientists cannot decide between the competing claims of religion. It is glaring that the objective of sociological study may be incompatible with the basic belief of many religious groups, and the researcher is expected to display scientific objectivity to the maximum. Religious belief is anchored on the view that there is a spiritual reality that co-exists with material reality. Sociologists do not have any valid, or reliable means to affirm or negate "divinely revealed truth" (Johnstone 1997:1-5). Sociologists desire to understand the meaning of religion to votaries, and the impact of religion on society. It is also possible for sociologists to understand the larger society through the study of religion. The sociological perspective involves the questioning of taken-for-granted methods of social analysis and examining of the interdependence of religion on other social institutions and vice versa.

No matter man's level of civilization and technological advancement, religion remains a very important social fact. Religion is not just a legacy of antiquity, but a social phenomenon and a universal human need. Kelly observes that a human need whose fulfilment has sometimes entailed mutilations, human sacrifices, war and at times social and political instability cannot be underrated. “The deplorable enormities occasionally practiced in the name of religion, as well as
its regular perversion by rulers to uphold their thrones, testify not only to its rootage in man's primordial past but to the leverage in men's lives that can be exploited today by its unscrupulous manipulation” (1972:155).

REFERENCES
Andersen, Margaret L., (1997). Thinking about Women: Sociological Perspectives on Sex and Gender, Boston: Allyn and Bacon.