

ITS09 – Religion

1. Introduction: A sociological eye on religion:

- Non-normative
- Explaining (\neq judging) people's religious beliefs and practices, and analyzing their consequences in everyday life
- On a more macro-level, explaining the transformations of the forms and role of religion in society

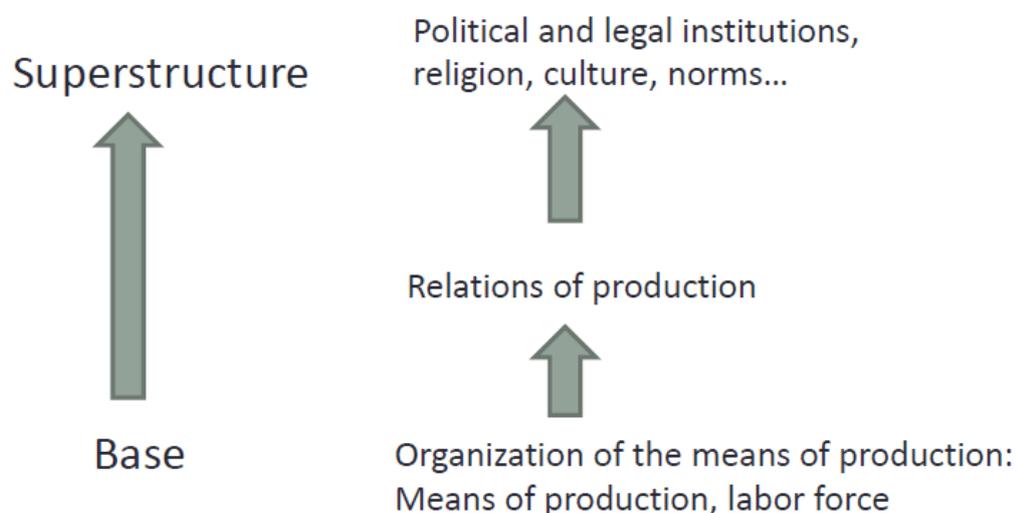
2. Religion: a foundational theme in sociological theory

A. Marx: religion as part of the « superstructure »

- Religion must be understood in relation to its social and economic context
- Religion as part of « superstructure »:

“In the social production of their existence, men inevitably enter into definite relations, which are independent of their will, namely relations of production appropriate to a given stage in the development of their material forces of production. The totality of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which arises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. The mode of production of material life conditions the general process of social, political and intellectual life. **It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness**”.

K. Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, 1859



- Religion has an ideological function in a system of capitalist exploitation: it disguises exploitation and makes it seem natural and acceptable → a form of alienation
- « Religion is the opium of the people »

B. Max Weber's Protestant ethic

- *The protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism*: religion as a source of life ethic
- *The sociology of religions*: a comparative analysis of world religions
- Disenchantment and rationalization
- An organizational focus on religion

→ *The protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism*

- What is Weber trying to explain? Not capitalism as a whole but the “spirit of capitalism”
- How is he explaining it? Complex causality (≠ determinism)
- What is explanatory in religion? Not dogma but life ethic
- How is this ethic enforced? The role of predestination
- “Elective affinities” between the protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism

C. Emile Durkheim's Elementary forms of religious life

- Point of departure = study of totemic religion among Australian Aborigenes
- A functional perspective
- Religion as a system of beliefs and rituals
- The **sacred/profane** opposition as a distinctive feature of Durkheim's definition:

« A religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things which are set apart and forbidden – beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them » (Durkheim, 1912, p.47)

- The role of rituals and collective « effervescence » in the creation and incorporation of collective beliefs

« Life in Australian societies alternates between two different phases. In one phase, the population is scattered in small groups that attend to their occupations independently. [...] In the other phase, by contrast, the population comes together, concentrating itself at specified places for a period that varies from several days to several months. This concentration takes place when a clan or a portion of the tribe is summoned to come together and on that occasion either conducts a religious ceremony or holds what in the usual ethnographic terminology is called a corroboree.

These two phases stand in the sharpest possible contrast. The first phase, in which economic activity predominates, is generally of rather low intensity. [...] Everything changes when a corroboree takes place. [...] Once the individuals are gathered together, a sort of electricity is generated from their closeness and quickly launches them to an extraordinary height of exaltation ».

(Durkheim, 1912, p.429)

“the believer is not deceived when he believes in the existence of a moral power upon which he depends and from which he receives all that is best in himself: this power exists, it is society. When the Australian is carried outside himself and feels a new life flowing within him whose intensity surprises him, he is not the dupe of an illusion; this exaltation is real and it is really the effect of forces outside of and superior to the individual. [...]

Thus religion acquires a meaning and a reasonableness that the most intransigent rationalist cannot misunderstand. [...] Before all, it is **a system of ideas with which the individuals represent to themselves the society of which they are members**, and the obscure but intimate relations which they have with it. This is its primary function; and **though metaphorical and symbolic, this representation is not unfaithful**. [...] **it is an eternal truth that outside of us there exists something greater than us, with which we enter into communion**.

That is why we can rest assured in advance that the practices of the cult, whatever they may be, are something more than movements without importance and gestures without efficacy. By the mere fact that their apparent function is to strengthen the bonds attaching the believer to his god, they at the same time really strengthen the bonds attaching the individual to the society of which he is a member, since the god is only a figurative expression of the society”.

(Durkheim, 1912, p.225-226)

D. Functional vs substantive definitions of religion

- Substantive : what religion *is*
- Functional : what religion *does*

3. Four sociological outlooks on religion

A. Secularization

- Definitions
 - “the process by which sectors of society and culture are removed from the domination of religious institutions and symbols” (Peter Berger, *The sacred canopy*).
 - “the process whereby religious thinking, practice and institutions lose their social significance” (Bryan Wilson, *Religion in secular society*).
- A decline in the institutional and cultural role of religion (Willaime, 1995)
- Several aspects involved:
 - Social, political, legal institutions gain autonomy from religious authority → a process of differentiation
 - Social representations are gaining autonomy from the hold of religious references; bodies of knowledge and cultural productions gradually emancipate themselves from religion : arts, science, etc.
 - In individual behavior and beliefs, increased autonomy from religious prescriptions:
 - Decline in cult-related activities (ex. church-going)

Decline of the hold of religious norms on social behavior (ex. Premarital cohabitation)

① Évolution de la pratique religieuse par âge entre 1987 et 1996

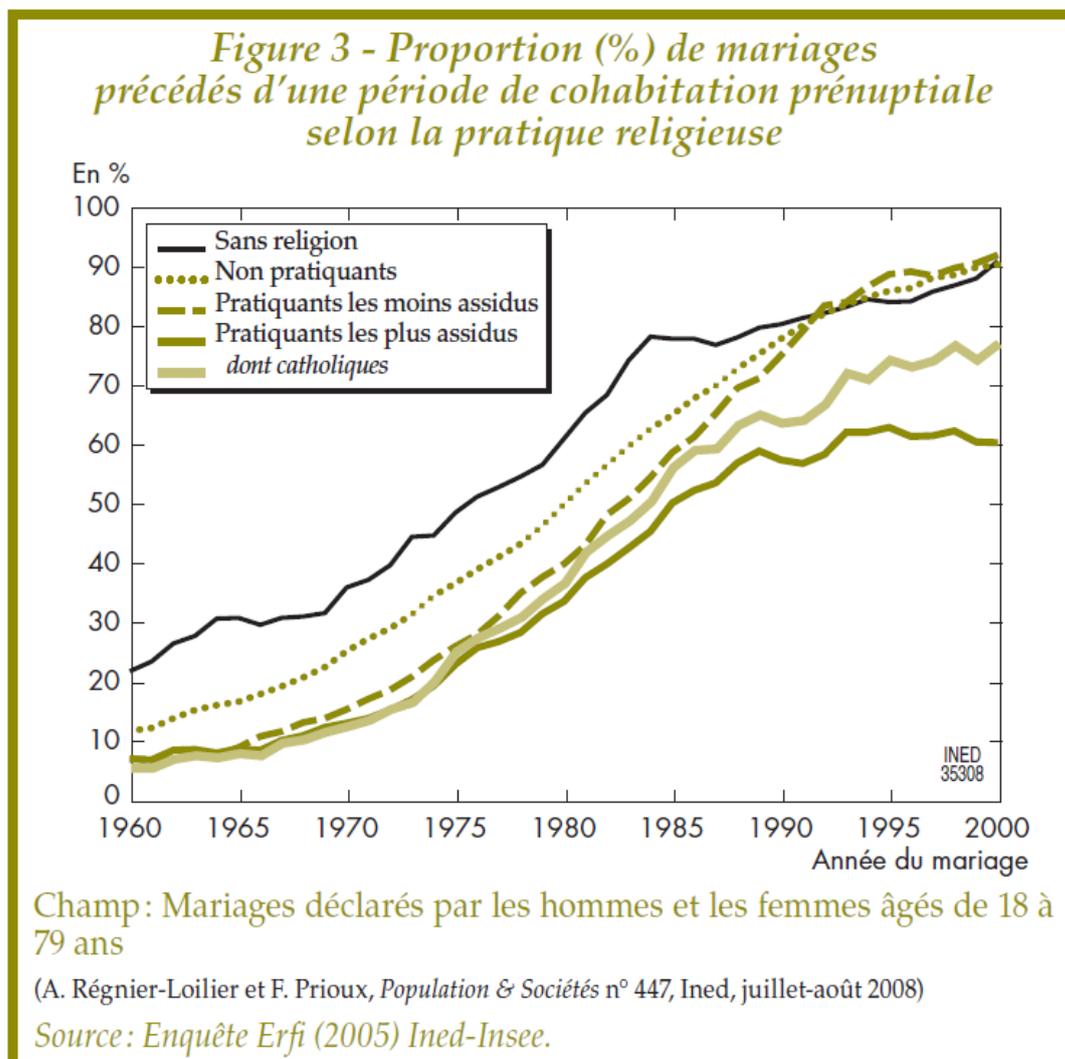
En %

Tranche d'âge	Pratique religieuse régulière		Ni pratique, ni sentiment d'appartenance	
	1987	1996	1987	1996
15 à 24 ans	9	8	33	40
25 à 39 ans	8	8	27	35
40 à 59 ans	15	14	17	22
60 ans et plus	21	28	11	14
Ensemble	13	16	22	25

Lecture : 9 % des personnes de 15 à 24 ans enquêtées en 1987 déclaraient une pratique régulière, et 8 % en 1996.

Sources : Enquête permanente sur les conditions de vie (EPCV), octobre 1996 et enquête "loisirs" 1987-88, Insee

Source: Niel, X. (1998). "L'état de la pratique religieuse en France." *INSEE Première*(570).



Source : Régnier-Loilier, A. and F. Prioux (2008). "La pratique religieuse influence-t-elle les comportements familiaux ?" *Population et sociétés*(447).

- Studying the decline in religious practice in France (Chenu, 2011): Le Bras and the « lived religion » (religion vécue): 4 degrees of participation in the « essential acts » prescribed by the Catholic church:
 - *Étrangers à la vie de l'Église/Dissidents*
 - *Conformistes saisonniers* (seasonal conformists)
 - *Pratiquants réguliers* (practicing on a regular basis)
 - *Dévots* (devout)
- Grace Davie (1994) : « Believing without belonging »

B. Religious organizations

- Drawing on Weber's focus on the organizational dimension of the church
- The church as a work organization : the example of recent research on the « stained-glass ceiling » in religious organizations (de Gasquet, 2009)

C. Religion as meaning-making: the symbolic dimension of religious beliefs

- C.Geertz: religion as « a system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic » (Geertz, 1993, p.90)
- D.Snow and R.Machalek (1983): analysis of the form of conversion rhetoric: a radical change in the convert's universe of discourse:
 - Biographical reconstruction
 - Adoption of a master attribution frame
 - Suspension of analogical reasoning
 - Embrace of a master role

D. When religion is everywhere : the functional view

• Religion in politics : Bellah's notion of « civil religion »
 “the separation of church and state has not denied the political realm a religious dimension. Although matters of personal religious belief, worship, and association are considered to be strictly private affairs, there are, at the same time, **certain common elements of religious orientation that the great majority of Americans share**. These have played a crucial role in the development of American institutions and still provide **a religious dimension for the whole fabric of American life, including the political sphere**. This public religious dimension is expressed in **a set of beliefs, symbols, and rituals that I am calling American civil religion**”.

Bellah, R. (1967). "Civil religion in America." *Dædalus, Journal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences* 96(1): 1-21.

- Religion in sports : Coles on football as a « surrogate » religion (1973)
- Luckmann's *Invisible religion* (1967) : from « how religious are people? » to « how are people religious ? »
 - Religion as the « transcendence of biological nature by the human organism », that can take on other forms that institutionalized religion: self expression, self-realization, autonomy... A lower degree of transcendence

→ Back to Durkheim's characterization of religion (beliefs, rituals, sacred/profane) : from religion to collective representations

« **religious beliefs are only one particular case of a very general law.** Our whole social environment seems to us to be filled with forces which really exist only in our own minds. **We know what the flag is for the soldier; in itself, it is only a piece of cloth.** Human blood is only an organic liquid, but even today we cannot see it flowing without feeling a violent emotion which its physico-chemical properties cannot explain. From the physical point of view, a man is nothing more than a system of cells, or from the mental point of view, than a system of representation; in either case, he differs only in degree from animals. Yet society conceives him, and obliges us to conceive him, as invested with a character sui generis that isolates him, holds at a distance all rash encroachments and, in a word, imposes respect. This dignity which puts him into a class by himself appears to us as one of his distinctive attributes, although we can find nothing in the empirical nature of man which justifies it. [...] **In a sense, our representation of the external world is undoubtedly a mere fabric of hallucinations** [...].

collective representations very frequently attribute to the things to which they are attached qualities which do not exist under any form or to any degree. Out of the commonest object, they can make a most powerful sacred being.

Yet the powers which are thus conferred, though purely ideal, act as though they were real; **they determine the conduct of men with the same degree of necessity as physical forces.** The Arunta who has been rubbed with his churinga feels himself stronger; he is stronger. If he has eaten the flesh of an animal which, though perfectly healthy, is forbidden to him, he will feel himself sick, and may die of it. Surely the soldier who falls while defending his flag does not believe that he sacrifices himself for a bit of cloth. This is all because social thought, owing to the imperative authority that is in it, has an efficacy that individual thought could never have; by the power which it has over our minds, it can make us see things in whatever light it pleases; it adds to reality or deducts from it according to the circumstances. **Thus there is one division of nature where the formula of idealism is applicable almost to the letter: this is the social kingdom. Here more than anywhere else, the idea is the reality** ».

(Durkheim, 1912, p.227-8)

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