

## RELIGION AS INSTRUMENT OF SOCIALIZATION AND SOCIAL CONTROL

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### Abstract

Sociologists for many years have identified the family, the school, the peer group, the mass media and political movements as agents of socialization. Majority of sociologists do not consider religion as a potent agent of socialization. The conservative roles of religion in perpetuating social and cultural values are often ignored. This paper seeks to correct such mistake and to present religion as a veritable platform for socialization and social control. The study reveals that religion exercises a pervasive influence on all other social institutions thereby moderating the activities of the above-mentioned agents of socialization.

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**Keywords:** Religion and socialization, Religion and social control, Religion and culture

### Introduction

Socialization is defined in the *Oxford Dictionary of Sociology* (2005), as “the process by which we learn to become members of society, both by internalizing the norms and values of society, and also by learning to perform our social roles” (1621). Elkin and Handel (1972), defines socialization as “the process which someone learns the ways of a given society or social group so that he can function within it” (4). Peter Berger in his *Invitation to Sociology* (1974), defined socialization as the “process by which a child learns to be a participant member of society” (116). Ian Robertson (1987), defines socialization as the “process of social interaction through which people acquire personality and learn the way of life of their society” (115). It is through socialization that the individual learns the normative values, beliefs, skills, languages and other essential patterns of thought and action that is relevant for social life.

Socialization is a process by which cultural and behavior pattern of a particular society is transmitted from one generation to another for social perpetuation. As a process of internalization, individuals are inducted and absorbed into one's social and physical environment. All human societies have well-defined strategies for social control which includes system of values, beliefs, norms and sanctions.

Value system prescribes what is intrinsically worthwhile. It has to do with social conception of what is right and wrong and what 'ought to be'. Values are sole determinants of priorities among people's goals and objectives. It is also the basis for self-approval or condemnation. Socialization affords the society the privilege to reproduce itself socially and biologically perpetually from one generation to another. Since in the words of Peter Berger (1974), "identity is socially bestowed, socially sustained and socially transformed" (116), the child discovers his identity and personality in the process of learning.

### **Culture And Socialization**

While it is not correct to use the words "culture" and "society" interchangeably, it is appropriate to emphasize that there is a symbiotic relationship between the two concepts – while culture is a system of norms and values, a society is an independent, self-perpetuating human group with a territory, and a shared culture. The fact is that the human society is a system of interrelationships that links people together, and no culture can exist either without a society, or independent of society, and society is not a reality unless within the context of a culture.

The components of culture, also known as cultural universals are symbols, language, values and norms. Human beings in social life create a reality of meaning, and also transform the elements into symbols. John Marcionis (2002), has defined symbols as "anything that carries a particular meaning recognized by the people who share culture" (37). Symbols are cultural creation. Gerhard Lenski (1970), has defined culture as "mankind's symbol systems and all aspects of human life dependent on it" (18). Mammals generally do communicate with others of their species except for man, while mammals are restricted to the use of signals for communication; man uses both symbols and signals with a cultural precision. Man uses symbols and signals as platforms for the transmission of information and for communication purposes. As a veritable source of social conformity, culture provides society with a cognitive structure and framework. When people subscribe to a particular idea and value it is an affirmation of the beliefs of their family members, teachers or leaders of thought in the society (Giddens, Duneier and Appelbaum 2003:57-60).

Marcionis (2009), has described language not only as the heart of the symbolic system, but also as "a system of symbols that allows people to communicate with one another" (38). Language is a typical example to explain the unity and diversity of human culture. While there are no cultures without a language, there is no universally accepted language that is spoken everywhere in the world. Language facilitates social interaction and communication; it ensures cultural transmission and continuity.

Perhaps, the most influential role of culture in human society is the establishment of criteria for the determination of values like desirability, goodness and beauty in social life. Values are culturally codified statements of what is acceptable to the society. It is the value system that produces the belief system, "values are abstract standard of goodness, while beliefs are particular matters people hold to be true or false" (Marcionis 2002:38). Sociologists are convinced that culture is

normative, meaning that it provides standard of proper behavior. Culture is a system of norms that covers folkways and mores. Folkways means the customary, usual or habitual ways a group does certain things, while mores are powerful ideas of right and wrong which grant legitimacy to certain behaviors and actions and forbid others (Horton and Hunt 1980:62-63).

### **Religion And Socialization**

It is through socialization; that the child is integrated into the meaning structure of society. Life has to be meaningful. As a process of initiation into the larger society, religion is a veritable pivot of socialization. In this case, parental faith, or religion becomes the faith of children. Erik Erikson has said that parents are not only to guide through rules, but should be able to lead the child into a deep conviction that there is a meaning to what they are doing. Erikson also observed that sometimes children become neurotic not as a result of frustration per se “but from the lack or loss of societal meaning in these frustrations” (224).

Social meanings are derived from past history, and present structure of society. Social reality is never subjected to any debate. It is pre-defined in the language in which socialization occur. Conformity to shared values is vital for the continued existence of society. Meanings are socially sustained. It has no logical affirmation. People have no right to probe the correctness, or otherwise of social meanings. David Silverman was right when he said: “Meanings are given to men by their society. Shared orientations become institutionalized and are experience by later generations as social facts. While society defines man, man in turn defines society” (146).

In socialization process, the social world is experienced as an external and unquestioned reality. Fundamental to the task of socialization is the role of parents. Parents have the duty to educate their children on social conventions. Children are to be taught the language, craft and related skills of the society. Religiously, children have no choice, than adopting the beliefs of parents. Erikson elucidates further: “...parental faith which supports the trust emerging in the new born has throughout history sought its institutional safeguard in organized religion. All religion have in common the periodical childlike surrender to a provider or providers who dispense earthly fortune as well as spiritual health” (225). Erikson has described this as "communal and psychosocial side of religion" (225).

Although religion may be a personal thing, there is a communal dimension. Just as individuals through a guilt complex, look for ways to appease the supernatural forces, even so, the society. Young people are often initiated to the various rites of passage and process of atonement. Erikson observes that primitive religions “abound with efforts at atonement which try to make up for vague deeds against a material matrix and try to restore faith in the goodness of one's strivings and in the kindness of the powers of the universe” (225).

Another dimension of the socialization process which is intrinsically religious is to intimate children at the formative years with the idea of the sacred. This, have moral consequences. Young people have to be taught that social life is not only in the physical (or profane), but that there is an

invisible domain which is equally relevant to man. Each society must have “the institutionalized form of reverence which derives vitality from its world-image from predestination to indeterminacy. The clinician can only observe that many are proud to be without religion whose children cannot afford their being without it” (Erikson 1977: 225).

### **Religion And Social Control**

Religion as an integrative social force shapes collective belief into collective identity. Religious rituals like weddings, child dedication, burials and birth day celebration promotes group solidarity and cohesion. Identification with a particular religious group, gives the votaries a sense of belonging. It also promotes the feelings of exclusion to those who are outside the group. People who live in a place where their religion is not a dominant culture have a feeling of estrangement and alienation.

Another important content of socialization is the belief system, which consist of variegated logic, reasoning and argument that society apply to determine truth. Social criterion for truth are not always monolithic, but rather a product of complex hybridization, such that truth can be gleaned from wise sayings, proverbs or songs. Normative systems refer to the modes of behavior people are supposed to put up to achieve their aims. Norms are rules and regulations. Individuals are expected to conform to the norms. Society has a range of moral precept that is deemed permissible or normal.

Over and above the region of normality, some behavior patterns are classified as grossly 'abnormal'. The individual, who dabbles into the realm of abnormality habitually, is a deviant, who must be corrected. The deviant announces his presence by failing to respond as typically expected and displays some element of spectacular radicalism to stand unique. The society views such action as a moral offense against reality. It is through the process of socialization that individuals get to know the "do's and don't" of society. Socialization is an initiation into the heart of society.

Sanction system has to do with the rewards and penalties which society stipulates for individuals according to performance and merit. The structure of society depends on the way values, beliefs, norms and sanctions are interrelated. In societies where all the systems are integrated, it means that a high degree of organization prevails; in others which are marked by conflict and discord, it means there is a high degree of social disorganization. Berger and Berger have defined socialization as "the imposition of social pattern on behavior" (62). Socialization is an imposition, because society expects uniformity and consistency in social relationships. Children are expected to emulate social behavior without discrimination.

O'brien, Schrag and Martin (1964) are of the opinion that if a child is brought up in a society that values tradition, more than social change and invention, he may be punished for resenting social conventions and challenging sacred beliefs and assumptions “and for innovations in his personal preferences and opinions. Were the same child reared in a modern technological society, he would perhaps be rewarded for his inventiveness and individuality” (O'brien, Schrag and Martin 201).

Berger and Berger (1976), have posited that the absoluteness with which societies pattern confront the child is attributed to two reasons; the power and influence of the adult, and the ignorance of the child of possible alternatives. Although children may attempt resistance, it is probable that eventually, the adult will overcome the child because “It is they who control most of the rewards that he craves and most of the sanctions that he fears. Indeed, the simple fact that most children are eventually socialized affords simple proof of this proposition” (63). Berger and Berger (1976), argues further that the child is ignorant of any existing alternatives to the patterns that are being imposed upon him by society. The adult society presents a socially created world to the child and “It is only much later that he discovers that there are alternative to this particular world, that his parents world is relative in space and time, and that quite different patterns are possible” (63).

The religious functions of providing social cohesion and collective identity, culminates into the function of religion in social control. Margaret Andersen (1997), is of the view that in all human societies, religious sanctions chastise those who violate religious norms, thereby, controlling the development of self and group identity. “In the extreme, groups who deviate from religious proscriptions may be tortured, executed, or excommunicated; in more subtle ways, religious deviants may be ridiculed, shunned or ostracized” (Andersen 1997:226).

Religion provides society with a positive framework to manage frustrations and miseries. Many people, who could have committed suicide, changed their minds and developed fresh courage for living. For people who are sentenced to many years of imprisonment, religion provides the needed hope for a better future. People who are hopeless and despondent find succour in religion. The song writer, Henry Francis Lyte had said: “When other helpers fail, and comforts flee, Help of the helpless, O abide with me” (92). With songs like this, religion transfers the human psychic from the terrestrial to the celestial realm. In the mind-set of futuristic bliss and hope of divine intervention, religion diverts the attention of its followers from the present injustices, deprivation, oppression, exploitation and dehumanization to a good future in the heavenly places.

Religion teaches its followers to accept even negative life experiences, and their fate as something that is divinely predestined, Paul had taught in the New Testament that “all things work together for good” (Rom. 8:28). Christians are expected to seek first the kingdom of God. They are to look for another home which Jesus has prepared for them, a home whose builder is God. With this type of doctrinal emphasis, the minds of votaries are transposed to the supra-human realm. Some religious ceremonies require a display of the spirit of forgiveness, empathy, and humanitarianism. Religion is an instrument for social control.

Statistics abound to the effect that Christianity has reduced crime rate in some societies through conversion. Some converted criminals are now working as pastors around the world. In many societies, religion has caused its adherents to accept the status quo. This is the conservative role of religion. In doing this, revolutionary struggle is viewed as a diabolic and futile venture. The Judaic-Christian tradition have taught that rebellion is synonymous with the sin of witchcraft (1 Sam. 15:23).

To some religions, government is a divine establishment. Any opposition to the government is interpreted as an affront against the cosmic sovereignty of God who appointed rulers (Rom. 13: 1-7). The only known contradiction that is true and recurring in the history of religions is that one religion may promote good neighborliness, social righteousness, urbanity, civility and love, while another may contribute to disorganization by preaching a holy war against non-believers. In each case, religion is doing the same thing, whether in promoting passivity or rebellion, integration, or disruption.

Religion also plays a prophetic function. It provides authentic and time-honored standards upon which institutional norms can be evaluated. Religion is the basis and legitimation for the criticism of the established order. Religion arrogates to itself the duty of a “watchdog” and social umpire. As the acknowledged custodian of human ideals and aspirations, religion has always provided a platform for social control. Iwe (1992), observes that organized religion has always played a quasi-revolutionary role by calling to order both man and society when there is a drift towards self-destruction, immorality and social injustice (Religion, Morality 8).

Christianity, for instance, was instrumental to the abolition of slave trade, human sacrifices, killing of twin babies and ostracisation of twin mothers in Africa. The church was also in the forefront in the struggle against racism, Semitism and apartheid. The church was also directly involved in exposing the 'inhumanities' inherent in communism. T. Okere posits thus: “The prophetic function is therefore both vital for the survival of freedom and the individual in society to the raising of standards in society itself” (7).

Religion helps man to know his creator, thus satisfying didactically man's intellectual nature and yearnings. Religion provides man with a spiritual world-view. It also exposes the spiritual dimension of culture. According to Iwe, “Religion performs this role by lifting man above the morass of mere material and carnal satisfactions to the practical acknowledgement of the transcendental absolute, God ...” (Iwe, Religion, Morality 7).

## **Conclusion**

This study has shown that social and cultural development in any society is not possible without the full integration of the religious dimension of social life. Even in the primitive society after food gathering the most persistent social inclination was the religious nature of man. Admittedly, even in modern society, after the satisfaction of man's basic need; food, water, and shelter, the religious drive which is almost instinctual dominates the human person from cradle to old age. Social progress cannot be achieved in isolation of religious elements.

The human society can only achieve cultural progress when all the component institutions are integrated for holistic development. It is unfortunate that some scholars because of anti-religious orientation have denied religion its position as a veritable platform for socialization. If socialization is the process by which society achieves cultural continuity and perpetuates itself, then it is counter-productive to exclude religion from the things to be imparted to posterity.

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