Theories of religion

Introduction

Substantive definition – What religion is, the supernatural and the sacred

Functional definition – The role religion plays in society (social and psychological functions)

Social constructionist definition – How members of society themselves define religion.

Paragraph 1 (Functionalist theory)

Functional definition

Durkheim –

The difference between the sacred and the profane. Studied the Arunta clan and found they all wore a totem – gives them a sense of belonging.

Believes that religion is a set of beliefs in relation to the sacred, makes integration possible.

When people engage in religion, they are strengthening their sense of belonging and solidarity between others.

However, the post-modernist perspective say that there is now more individual worship.

It can offer people confidence, serenity and endurance. Endure life for a better after-life.

Malinowski –

Helps people to cope with emotional stress, otherwise would break down social solidarity. E.g. in life crises or situations of anxiety.

Parsons –

It answers ultimate questions and promotes value consensus.

However, sociologist may say that religion only acts as false hope and science answers questions.

Bellah –

Believes in “civil religion”, everyone has their own religion but one “civil religion” unites everyone.

A belief in god doesn’t constitute a religion if the beliefs perform the same function.

Analysis: mention if there is a British Civil religion.

Evaluation –

Functionalism is too optimistic, ignores negatives of religion such as oppression. (link to feminists)

Fails to explain the origins of religion, only the functions. (link to science)

Theories are outdated – more diversity in beliefs so value consensus are too varied.

Analysis –

What function does religion fulfil for society? – collective values and belonging.

What function does it fulfil for the individual? – confidence, peace and endurance.