A2 Sociology Essay:
Evaluate the View That Religion is An Important Source of Moral Values in Contemporary Societies

Various views have been posited on the purpose of religion, including that of it being an important source of moral values in contemporaneous societies. This view shall be evaluated.

Durkheim (a functionalist) proposed the idea that religious institutions are key to creating and maintaining value consensus, as well as order and solidarity. Durkheim claimed that sacred (defined as forbidden things that evoke feelings such as awe) symbols represent society’s collective conscience. That is, the shared norms, values and knowledge that allow for successful social integration amongst people – without these, society would destabilise. In addition, participating in shared rituals reminds individuals that they belong to a single moral community that requires their loyalty. Thus religion can be said to perform a crucial function for the individual – through the abovementioned social integration, people are motivated to prevail through life’s tribulations.

Critique for this view has been offered by postmodernists such as Mestrovic, who argue that due to religious pluralism, society’s collective conscience has been fragmented and so a single shared value system for religion to reinforce does not exist. Withal, whilst his theory may explain social integration within communities, it does not explain the conflicts between them. Worsley claims that there is not a sharp division between the sacred and profane, thus undermining a fundamental aspect to Durkheim’s theory. This is reinforced by Bunting, who notes that religious belief is becoming a DIY ‘cocktail’. Dissimilarly to the past, there is not a single dominant religious holding the monopoly of truth, therefore demonstrating that moral values are still sought, albeit through various religious types.

Evidence for religion being an important source of moral values stems from the caste system of traditional India relying on Hindu religious beliefs to justify and maintain the values of caste discrimination, occupation and social patterns of acceptable behaviour. Moreover, religion legitimises events in modern society – for example, Parliament starts each day with prayers. Religion has also remained prevalent amongst immigrant groups who are marginalised in society.

From a Marxist viewpoint, religion is an instrument of oppression, used to maintain the existing system of exploitation through offering a theodicy of dispossession, for example, hence creating a false consciousness. Ruling classes adopt religious beliefs to justify their position to the working class – for example: ‘God made them high and lowly/And ordered their estate’. Such beliefs are internalised by the working class and henceforth prevent social change, evincing the usage of religion as a source of moral values. On the other hand, neo-Marxists such as Engels claim that religion can be an impetus for change. He contends that Christianity originated as a co-mingling mechanism for exploitation amongst oppressed groups.

Bruce notes that in the USA, conservative Protestants called the ‘New Christian Right’ consistently support right-wing political candidates in the Republican party. Said group advocates for a world returned ‘back to God’, whereby abortion, for instance, is made illegitimate. Their influence on American politics is limited, but this provides evidence for religion being a source of moral values.

Miller and Hoffman report that women are more likely to express a greater degree of religiosity. They identify an explanation for this as being differential socialisation: females are raised to be more submissive, obedient and nurturing than males; these traits are compatible with religiosity. This can be said that while religion is not necessarily an important source of moral values, it does nurture some. Parsons identifies essential functions that religion performs in modern society: the creation and legitimisation of society’s central values and being a primary source of meaning. In addition to this, it creates society’s fundamental norms and values by sacralising them. An example of this is USA Protestantism sacralising American values of individualism and self-discipline.

In terms of providing a source of meaning, religion answers questions about the human condition. For example, the theodicy of disadvantage states salvation may be granted to those who endure misfortune.

Bellah studied American society and found that it is unified by an overarching civil religion – a faith in Americanism. This consists of loyalty to the nation-state and a belief in an American God. Forms of expression include rituals, symbols and beliefs (e.g. a pledge of allegiance to the flag). This ultimately unites the people of America regardless of ethnic and religious backgrounds. On the other hand, religion is not the sole source of moral values. Functional alternatives, for example, reinforce shared values by maintaining social cohesion.

Tischler et al. argue that religion reaffirms group beliefs and values. Malinowski argues that religion promotes solidarity, through performing psychological functions in two types of situation. One situation denotes an outcome of importance yet is uncertain; studying the Trobriand Islanders of the Western Pacific suggests that rituals ensure a successful expedition due to increasing confidence levels and easing tension. Withal, religion creates a sense of solidarity amongst survivors during times of crises e.g. death. This can be critiqued on the grounds that people can use friendship networks for support during times of distress, hence crediting Malinowski’s theory.

Lyotard claims that postmodern society is characterised by the diminution of confidence in meta-narratives. Bauman refers to this as a ‘crisis of meaning’. He notes that morality becomes privatised, and in spite of this, individuals retain the desire to evaluate themselves and their own worth. Given the absence of universal truth, there are two pathways to attain reassurance: the seeking of justification for choices from ‘experts’ in a particular field, and a reliance upon a ‘mass following’. This therefore indicates that religion is no longer as significant in terms of providing moral truths in a postmodern society.

Bauman’s research has been critiqued by Beckford, who states that the it is contradictory to state that postmodernity undermines faith in external authorities whilst people simultaneously seek authority to validate their beliefs.

The emergence of Enlightenment (a series of scientific ideas) during the 18th century is a movement characterised by a reliance on e