A Cost/Benefit Analysis of Religion's Effects in Society

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Teaching Objectives/Student Learning Outcomes:

To introduce students to thinking about religion from a sociological perspective instead of a faith-based one; to illustrate religion as a social construction, a set of institutions, a resource mobilized by social actors, and an instantiation of power; to assist students in considering the structural effects of religion and provide practice in thinking about religion structurally instead of individualistically; to walk students through a discussion of religion that moves beyond a simplistic binary of good or bad, instead considering religion in more critical, sociological ways.

References:

Mills, C. Wright. 1959. The Sociological Imagination. New York: Oxford University Press.

Non-Muslims Carried Out More than 90% of All Terrorist Attacks on U.S. Soil. (2013, May 1). Retrieved December 6, 2014, from http://www.washingtonsblog.com/2013/05/muslims-only-carried-out-2-5-percent-of-terrorist-attacks-on-u-s-soil-between-1970-and-2012.html

Materials Needed: Chalkboard, whiteboard, or projection capabilities

Estimated Time: 45-75 minutes

Procedure:

This activity is a guided discussion about religion. It introduces sociological ways of considering religion, and as such is particularly effective as an early activity in a particular course's consideration of religion. The activity uses students' existing collective knowledge about different religions and their effects on society, allows them to express their own views on the social influence of religion, and intentionally sets them up to struggle against an overly simplistic binary. These strategies create investment and willingness to listen, before suggesting a sociological perspective that accounts for all of their varying contributions while simultaneously deconstructing overly facile discourses about religion.

The activity consists of three steps: first, considering how religion has caused harm and how religion has been positive; then, debating whether religion as a whole is a net positive or negative for society or social equality; and finally, deconstructing this binary debate to look more critically at how religion functions as a resource for maintaining or changing society. The brainstorm allows more introverted students to warm up to the conversation, and provides all students a foundation of data to think through in considering their positions in the debate. The debate allows all the students to put the examples into a larger framework and gives people with strong opinions about religion a chance to feel heard. The final discussion encourages them to take on a sociological perspective that sees religion as neither inherently good nor unequivocally bad, but as a socially constructed institution and a resource that different agents mobilize for different purposes. In this way, students see their own previous perspective as respected and represented within a larger sociological perspective.

Setup

I begin the activity with a short framing conversation, which serves to guide students' thinking, remind them of the kinds of contributions that are appropriate in a sociology class, and undercut possible difficulties later. The length and emphasis of this conversation can vary anywhere from 3-15 minutes, depending on my sense of the class and how much guidance is needed. The main points are:

- We will be talking about religion, but not about any one religion, and not about whether any one religion is correct or incorrect.
- Because this is a social science class, we will be focusing on the concrete, empirically measurable effects of religion on society, not the religious beliefs themselves (this can be contrasted with the way religion might be discussed in a religious studies class, a bible study, or a literature class that focuses on religious texts).
- The examples they provide can be about any one religion, the relationship between religions or religious groups, or can apply to all religions (or to the very idea of religion).
- Because we are discussing only the empirically measurable effects of religion on society, the activity should work equally well for them—that they should be able to have this conversation intelligently and critically—regardless of their own beliefs or lack thereof.
- Though we will be saying both good and bad things about many religions, there will be no proselytizing of any one religion, nor will there be attacking of any one religion.
- This activity is not about anyone's own religious beliefs, it is about the effects of religion as a whole - all religions – on society (and social inequality, if that is a focus of the class).

I check that students understand that, though examples from specific religions can be used to illustrate what *some* religions do and how religion *can* function, no one religion will be the focus.

If we have already discussed hegemony or privilege, I will also ask which religion is hegemonic/privileged in the United States and how we can tell. We spend a minute discussing some ways Christianity is central and assumed: many Christian holidays are marked with days off in public institutions; one can generally wear external markers of Christianity without significant negative repercussions; television stations and movie theaters will regularly have movies about Christian holidays, and television shows will have Christmas specials, but other religions are not similarly represented; one can usually mention being Christian during job interviews without fearing that it will negatively affects one's candidacy, etc. I ask the class to intentionally resist this hegemony/privilege by a) intentionally thinking about examples from other religions they have knowledge of, and b) checking whether their statements about Christianity might be generalizable, or apply to other religions as well (e.g. Christianity promotes taking care of the poor, but so do many other religions).

If at any point during the discussions a student derails the conversation by focusing on their own religious beliefs, or getting into contentious territory, this setup usually allows me to navigate around the problem without seeming to be impugning their beliefs. Since we have already discussed what this conversation should look like when being framed sociologically, I can kindly remind them of this frame and point out how they are getting off track, and either redirect them myself or offer them the opportunity to reframe their comments in a way that is more empirical, less individualistic and more sociological, less Christianity-focused, etc.

Listmaking Brainstorm

I begin this part of the activity by putting up two headings on the board or projection: "Examples of Religious Harm to Societies" and "Examples of Religious Benefit to Societies." I give two examples of each myself (I use religious terrorism, the Spanish Inquisition, Mother Theresa, and Zakat/Tzedakah) and describe each one briefly. I point out that Christianity, Islam, Judaism, and even Buddhism all have religious extremists who use terror as their tactic, and mention casually that in the last 30 years, Jews and Christians have committed more acts of terror in the U.S. than Muslims; I explain Zakat (Islam) and Tzedakah (Judaism) as religiously mandated giving by the wealthy to assist the poor, and inquire whether students knew that one of the 5 pillars of Islam, the main tenants of the faith, is a mandate for helping the poor (and that it is stronger than similar mandates in other religions).

I tell students that I chose these examples specifically to point out that their examples can be very broad (terrorism) or very specific (Mother Theresa), current or historical (Spanish Inquisition), and to model considering whether an example can apply to multiple religions (Zakat/Tzedakah). I then open the lists up to students, saying they can contribute to either list at any time, and I add their contributions to the appropriate lists. Student contributions for religious harms have included: Irish sectarian war between Protestants and Catholics; various religious precepts enabling sexism and homophobia; judgement and oppression of other religions; conflict between religions, such as the Crusades and the current Middle East conflicts; religions influencing politics in ways that then apply to non-adherents as well. Contributions to religious benefits have included: figures like Martin Luther King Junior and Gandhi; churches functioning as safe havens for the homeless, marginalized, and persecuted; religious precepts that encourage feeding and taking care of the needy; moral guidance; a sense of belonging, community, and meaning for followers.

A big part of this conversation is discussing and deliberating about the suggestions students make. As appropriate, I prod students to consider their suggestions more critically. When someone suggests that religion provides community and belonging, for example, I query who it provides these for, and we then include the attendant feelings of marginalization and exclusion that non-adherents may feel in the "harms" column. If a student says something that implies that religion is the source of all ethical behavior, I point out all the people who are ethical without being religious, and ask students whether religion is the only reason they do not engage in unethical behaviors (selecting specific example behaviors for the class).

The first few times a student mentions something that is a particularly good example of thinking sociologically or structurally (e.g. that having multiple social groups that each strongly believe their own religious perspective is the only right virtually ensures conflict between these groups), I point that out and strongly affirm them. The first few times a student says something that is particularly individualistic (e.g., faith sustained me through a difficult time in my own life) I subtly and gently rephrase it into a more sociological perspective (e.g. belief systems can provide communal support and motivation during difficult times) before adding it to the appropriate list. I explain that I am rephrasing their contribution in a more sociological way, or sometimes ask if I have still captured the essence of what they said. After a few of these, I being to ask the students to make this correction themselves, pointing out that this is practicing their sociological imagination; if a student struggles with this reframing, I ask if anyone else in the class can assist them. This listmaking continues until both lists have at least ten entries, and most of the students who seem interested in contributing have had their chance.

Debate

The debate is intentionally *not* set up with students picking a side and two sides facing each other: I want to give students the freedom to change their perspectives, and to subtly discourage adversarial behavior in what can already be a contentious topic. Instead, I just ask students to raise their hands and tell me "given all these ways that religion is good for society, and all these other ways it causes harm: is religion, on the whole, good or bad for society?"

I guide this discussion somewhat, summarizing or formalizing student responses and occasionally putting their ideas into conversation with each other. I affirm all responses, asking questions at times to encourage respondents to think a little more critically or sociologically, or to clarify their stances. Many students want to hedge, saying things like "religion is good in some ways and bad in others," or "spirituality is good but institutionalized religion is bad." I point this out and urge them to take a side, often saying things like "So, Diego also wants to think of religion as both good and bad – but which is it, Diego? If you have to pick one, is it *more* good or *more* bad?" One common form of hedging is to say that *spirituality* is positive but religion is *harmful;* when this perspective comes up, I point out that this is really a discussion of institutionalization. This is also a good opportunity to discuss how the vast majority of institutions, by their very nature *as* institutions, tend to help maintain the status quo by formalizing sets of roles, rules, and relationships. After a few of these encouraging comments, students who have been wary of making blanket statements will feel more willing to take a strong stand on one side or the other, and I affirm each perspective as the valid perspective of that student. Often students will find themselves arguing one side of the conversation and then the other, building off of each others' comments. This discussion continues until it seems beginning to taper off on it's own, or until I feel the need to curtail it in the interest of time.

Deconstruction

When most students have had a chance to speak their mind, I thank them for taking part in this intentionally oversimplified debate – *this is the first time that I admit that the debate is an oversimplification.* I remind them of all the ways that different students had wanted to shy away from a blanket determination of religion, pointing out that there were a lot of really good arguments and examples on both sides of the debate, and then propose the following points:

- The standard cultural conversations we have about religion as right or wrong, good or bad, are oversimplified. Not only that, they are less important than conversations about the actual effects of religion in society and on people's lives.
- Religions are socially constructed institutions; even if you believe a particular religion is the right one and that its texts are the literal word of god, the institutions that are built up around that text are social constructions, built by people in both concrete, literal ways (humans built the congregation buildings) and cultural ways (humans define the roles and relationships in the institution, and define how religion gets taken up in their lives).
- Religion is a cultural resource that different social actors can mobilize in different ways, to advocate for their own positive or negative goals. The same religion can be mobilized in different ways by proponents of slavery or abolition, of patriarchy or gender equality, of strict authoritarianism or compassionate egalitarianism. This means that religions or religious institutions are constructs of power, and power dynamics are implicit in the social functions of religion. This power appears in many ways: gendered power dynamics; missionizing/colonial power dynamics; clergy/religious authorities' power over laity; nationalist or authoritarian power that draws on religion; etc.

Interpretation:

Discussing religion with students can be fraught, especially because it is difficult for many students to move beyond their own religious beliefs and beyond the common discourse of whether a particular religion is right or wrong, to take a sociological perspective. This activity walks them past these ideas, one simple step at a time, and introduces them to sociological ways of thinking about religion in society while sidestepping discussion of any one belief system.

Possible Pitfalls:

This is certainly a fraught conversation, and social norms about not challenging others' faith or offending people by bringing up religion may make students hesitate to engage in any critical discussion at all. Early acknowledgement of this difficulty, possibly including directly naming these social norms, help ameliorate this concern. The early framing of the conversation as a sociological and empirical one and the small stepwise progression of the conversation both help to avoid difficulties and provide resources for the instructor in navigating any that arise. Still, there is the possibility that one or more may be students unable or unwilling to set aside their personal religious beliefs, or that particularly religious students may struggle with or resist seeing religion as a social construct, and therefore feel silenced. It may be worth taking a moment to individually address a student who is struggling in these ways.

Courses: Introductory Sociology, Introduction to Religion, Social Inequality, Sociology of Religion, Intersectionality.