

Religion and Identity

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Abstract

This essay explores the link between religion and identity from three viewpoints, namely: religion as an expression of deep sense of unity and its linkage with identity formation especially in the context of Durkheim's insight; the link between religion and ethnicity in terms of forging identity formation and the link between religion and identity formation especially with reference to youth's religiousness and search for identity. Evidence regarding the relationship between identity and religion in the existing literature is limited. But, evidence from few studies suggests that religion is positively correlated with identity formation. This implies that religiosity is found to be relevant in explaining commitment and purposefulness in terms of identity formation. It is more likely that the strength of the relationship between religion and identity vary across different demographic groups as well as different epochs. For instance, the strength of the linkage between religion and identity is more likely to be stronger for younger individuals compared to mature adults. Similarly, religion as an important determinant of identity formation is more likely to be forceful and more binding in olden days compared to modern era. Overall, religion tends to be a key determinant of identity formation depending on circumstances, the groups covered and the period covered in the analysis.

Key Words: Identity, Religion, Ethnicity, and youth

Introduction

Recent developments in the field of social sciences in general and sociology in particular suggest a gradual tendency towards revival of interest on the issue of religion and identity. It is plausible that religion and identity may be positively correlated, especially when viewed and analysed within the prism of designated group of individuals such as adolescents, younger cohorts, older cohort's etc. The link between religion and identity can be contextualized through the exploration of the self. For instance, the search for identity has been recognized as key to the developmental task of adolescence.

There appears to be relatively few papers that explore the issue of religion and spirituality as a conduit for identity recognition and formation. While, religion addresses issues of beliefs, modus operandi and Vivendi, and spiritual teachings which might have an impact on the development of an individual self-conceptualization, the special role of religion and spirituality in the development of identity has been ignored for two reasons. First, some scholars consider religion as being instrumental for deepening our insights into the formation of identity. Second, some scholars view religion as an inhibiting source of identity formation (see, King, 2003). This paper explores the relationship between religion and identity.

Special reference will be made to the interplay of the religion and identity with reference to the unique of religion in shaping identity formation, the link between religion and ethnicity as one of the vehicles for identity development and the role of religion in forging identity formation especially for youths. The delimitation of this essay helps to establish focus and context through which most of the issues will be examined. The choice of youth for the last part of analysis is based on a number of issues. First, youths undergo different stages of development. It is plausible that a typical youth might assume different identities as he/she search for singularity and individuality of self. Second, a typical youth is very amenable to new ideas, new influences, and mentoring. This suggests that religion might play significant role in shaping the identity of a typical youth over time.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows. Section one explores the concept of religion. Section two addresses the concept of identity. Section three discusses the relationship between religion and identity. Section five concludes.

The Concept of Religion

Religion has been delineated in many and various ways according to a number of scholars. However, it seems that there is no generally accepted definition of religion taken into account the nature of the discipline, diversity of religions, diversity of religious experiences, and diversity of religious origins, among others. Religion like music is a hard concept to define. However, many theologians, philosophers, psychologists, sociologists and scholars in general have defined religion from varying viewpoints and conceptualizations.

This implies that religion has been defined in many ways and in a number of cases in line with a particular school of thought or discipline. For instance, scientific approaches to religion have often shifted between delineating religion with reference to its social or psychological functions and its belief contents (see, Berger, 1974). Etymological speaking, religion is derived from the Latin word 'religare' which means to "to bind back" or "to re-bind". This implies that etymologically speaking religion entails a process of reconnecting by worship a missing or broken intimacy between God and worshippers. Alternative less known and used etymological origin of religion is the Latin word 'relegere' denoting "to re-read" (see, Griffiths, 2000).

Boffetti (2004) citing Paul Tillich's definition of religion as "that which we designate as our symbol of ultimate concern". This suggests that religion relates to symbols with ultimate spiritual relevance and influence in worshippers way of life (see, Boffetti, 2004). Pecorino (2000) notes that a robust definition of religion needs to meet a number of requirements such as: involvement of the totality of life; is open to all kinds of people; deals with issues naturally in widely different activities; deals with issues in widely different notions and beliefs; exists and is practiced in both private and social milieus; is open to various opinions as to the veracity or otherwise its beliefs; and has repercussions perceived to be either harmful or beneficial to persons and groups.

In view of the above requirements, he defines religion as "the most intensive and comprehensive method of valuing that is experienced by humankind" (Chapter 3, Philosophy of religion). He argues that this definition is both ideal and actual. It does empower us to comprehend and explain religious phenomena in a better way. It also empowers us to comprehend the difference between religious experience and other kinds of human experiences. It also helps us to understand the relationships between religion and other forms of life such as language, among others (see, Pecorino, 2000).

Anih (1992) citing Schleremacher (1978) notes that:

Religion is the feeling of man's absolute dependence. This absolute dependence was encouraged by man's sense of inadequate protection, provision, sustenance and supremacy as such he has to depend on the divine for all those things he cannot provide for himself (P. 31). Schleremacher's definition of religion invokes a sense of man's dependence on a Supreme Being believed to be all powerful and all knowing. This arises from man's recognition of his limitations such as inability to explain some of the mysteries of the world, such as, the origin of man, the origin of death, life after death, among others. Man therefore yearns for a Being that he believed has all the answers and solutions to his problems, afflictions and unanswered questions. Anih (1992) citing Otto (1968) posits that religion relates to:

The feeling of awe, dread, mystery, and fascination men experience when confronted with what is holy, uncanny or supernatural. This supernatural being is the persistent value in the world. The essence of religion lies in the belief in this Supernatural Being, who though may not be seen physically is believed to be existent and imbued with superhuman qualities and quantities (P. 68).

Otto's conceptualization of religion shares a key feature with that of Schleremacher. They both agree that religion deals with belief on the existence of a supernatural being that is believed to be endowed with superhuman qualities. Otto's definition hints on the feeling of dependence faced by man especially when confronted with mystery, and, thus, man's attachment to Supreme Being. Anih (1992) citing Howels (1978) visualizes religion from a psychological point of view. He defines religion as a normal psychological adjustment of human society aimed at building a barrier of fantasy against fear and since any psychological adjustment is more is mainly associated with stress, it is therefore a source of emotion.

This definition suggests that man's longing for a Supreme Being is partly dependent on securing a kind of insurance against fear of the unknown. To build a barrier against fear, man associates with a Supreme Being who is believed to be more than able to extinguish fear and protect man from destruction either real or imaginative.

Anih (1992) citing Durkheim (1965) defines religion from a sociological viewpoint. He defines religion as a universal system of beliefs and practices related to sacred things. Durkheim's definition appeals to the place of holy symbols or objects in human society.

In this case, men tend to associate sacred objects or symbols to the Supreme Being. Insofar as man cannot see God in person, this association of sacred objects to Supreme Being may arguably help to fill the lacunae created from his supposedly inability to be in direct contact with the Supreme Being. Anih (1992) citing Taylor (1972) sees religion as a coherent embrace of convictions, ceremonies and customs associated with a deeper and greater reality Supreme Being compared with material reality. This suggests that religion deals with upholding of one's beliefs as it relates to the Supreme Being, the ceremonies that go with the sustenance of the belief system.

Anih (1992) citing Kant (1964) views religion as the recognition of our duties in accordance with divine commands.

Therefore once we do what ought to be done at the right time and right place we know we are doing religious work. Kant's conceptualization of religion seems to be more spiritual. He contextualizes religion to be associated with man's obedience to the teachings and commandments believed to have been handed down from the Supreme Being. Anih (1992) citing Burchardt (1985) visualizes religions as the expressions of the external and indestructible metaphysical cravings of human nature. Their grandeur is that they represent the whole supersensual complement of man, all that he cannot provide.

At the same time they are the reflections upon a great and different plane of whole people and cultural epochs. Burchardt's definition of religion tends to capture man's yearning for support from the Supreme Being, especially for those things he cannot provide for himself. The insatiable nature of human wants suggests that religion has a special place in man's life, suppose, this definition holds or withstand the crucible of reasoning, in terms of an individual judgement or group judgement.

On a related development, Anih (1992) citing Caird (1974) defines religion as the expression of man's whole consciousness of things. Similarly, Anih (1992) citing Spencer (1968) postulates that religion is the recognition that all things are manifestations of a power, which transcends our knowledge. These definitions seem to convey the message that man's adherence to religious beliefs stem from acknowledgement of his inadequacies especially in terms of issues or problems beyond his understanding and control. Man's inability to explain everything is associated with acknowledgement of a Being who can explain everything and thus, supremely more knowledgeable compared with man.

Anih (1992) citing Alston (1954) sees religion as believe in an ever living God who is divine, rules and will continue to rule the universe and while maintaining moral linkage moral with mankind. On a related development, Anih (1992) citing Arnold (1976) sees religion as ethics heightened by feelings. This implies that religion tends to consider on morality of an action as well as issues pertaining to difference between good and evil. It is worthwhile to note that some authors reject the authenticity of the existence of religion. Notable dissenting opinion came from Karl Marx. For instance, Anih (1992) citing Marx (1965) defines religion as the opium of the people. He argues that is more of an exploitative invention, which works like a drug. This drug works to beclouds man's rationality, thus, thwarting his reasoning ability.

Man's acknowledgement of religion and believe in the existence of deity leads to infantile neurosis and irrational actions that leaves him exploited. In view of the above definitions, religion seems to deal with the inexplicable relationship between man and divine, mundane being and transcendental being. Proponents of religion see it as a force for good and order in the society. From this standpoint, religion plays an important role in terms of helping to ensure harmonious co-existence of human beings. On the other hand, opponents such as Karl Marx see religion as a force for evil. It is more of an instrument construed and invented to oppress the downtrodden and poor masses. In summary, religion seems to be instrumental in the formation of identity.

The role of religions in different societies and epochs vary. Religion might be a powerful force in one society, less powerful in another and in some societies might have a negligible influence. The differential role of religion in different societies and epochs arguably does not eliminate in its entirety the influence of religion on identity development and evolution over time.

The Concept of Identity

Mol (1978) argues that the concept of identity is used in two different ways in the social sciences. The first way of conceptualizing identity deals with the notion of immutability, or at least the slowly changing core of personality that manifests in all aspects of an individual's undertakings, notwithstanding the influences of various role models. The second way deals with the transitory and adaptable self as individual's transit from one social milieu to another, providing potentially a somewhat different identity as it were in each occasion. Buttrressing further he notes that the first conceptualization brings up the issue of involuntary dimension of identity, while, the second raises the issue of adaptability of identity.

The first is reinforced in primary groups, arguably in early life; while, the second exists, taken into account that a significant amount of life is lived in milieu outside of primary groups. In the light of the two conceptualizations of identity, a number of observations might be noted: Both conceptualizations seem appropriate and therefore relevant; some institutional spheres, especially in terms of the family, are naturally important in the first sense; Whilst, other institutional spheres, such as the workplace are naturally essential in the second sense. Alternative institutional spheres such as religion and ethnicity stand out as examples of the second conceptualization of identity (see, Hammond, 1988).

This implies that primary groups and secondary groups play important role in forging of an individual or groups identity in a particular point in time and over time. Basically, family and secondary settings such as schools or workplace seem to be essential in identity formation.

The Link between Religion and Identity

This review of the link between religion and identity relates to three literatures. It starts with discussion of religion as expression of deep sense of unity especially in the context of Durkheim's insight. The next phase discusses ethnicity as one of the channels of identity formation especially through the prism of religion. The last phase of the review discusses the link between religion and identity especially with reference to youth religiousness and search for identity.

Hammond (1988) citing Durkheim notes that religion is a derivative of the social circumstances that create the enabling environment for involuntary acceptance of a way of life, especially as a consequence of group membership. For instance, people are made to manifest their sense of unity and belonging as a result of group membership through participation in rituals, ceremonies, belief systems or orientations and behaviour towards symbols and objects perceived to be sacred and treated with sense of awe and wonder. This submission closely reflects the *modus operandi* and *modus vivendi* of the central Australia aborigines, which served as the case study of Durkheim's research.

A close examination of Durkheim's submission may raise some doubts in terms its authenticity. First, to what extent does the modern society resemble the Australia countryside many years ago? Second, to what extent does the religion described by Durkheim resemble the modern religion of today? among others. There is little familiarity between the social environments of the past when compared to contemporary modern social environments. Similarly, past religions as espoused by Durkheim share little commonalities with religions in the modern era (Hammond, 1988).

In view of these issues, one may be inclined to reject Durkheim's insight as impractical in the contemporary society. It is most likely that society does not express the deep sense of unity as it once did in the past, or if it does, does so for limited amount of time. All the same, it essential to point out that the church may be a manifestation of deep rooted primary affiliations, especially in situations where those ties have elements of intra-group linkages (Hammond, 1988).

It has been acknowledged that there exists a correlation between religion and ethnicity. This correlation holds whether one perceived ethnicity subjectively or objectively, or even when one captures ethnicity using proxies of acculturation or assimilation of an individual into a group. For instance, participation or membership in a religion that is characteristic of one's ethnic group is mostly found to be highly correlated with the degree of one's ethnic identity (see, Moskos, 1980; Padgett, 1980; Reitz, 1980). A version of this literature relates to how different ethnic groups perceive and practice a single religion differently (see, Greeley, 1971; Abramson, 1973).

Little doubt exists between the strength of the relationship between religion and ethnicity; however, the interpretation of the positive correlation is not straightforward. A sense of ambiguity dominates as soon as one attempts to offer a coherent rationale for the detected linkage. For instance, Smith (1978) argues that the religions of immigrant groups in America were not simply derived from the home country alone, but, that religion plays important dynamic role in the configuration of ethnicity as migrants established community in America, even where none may have existed prior to the prevailing arrangement.

In similar vein, Abramson (1980) argues that in some instances, it is case that religion equates to ethnicity, but, this does not apply for all ethnicity groups. He cited groups such as Amish, Mormons, Hutterites and Jews as ones fall under the category of direct linkage between religion and ethnicity. The robust link suggests that non-existence of religion implies the high likelihood that the ethnic group would not exist. In some instances, religion plays a forceful foundational role in the formation of ethnicity; but its foundational influence is diluted by other important foundational factors such as: unique territory origin and perhaps, a distinctive language.

The groups that fit these examples include: the Greek Orthodox or Dutch Reform. In other instances, the relationship between ethnicity and religion is real, but, religion plays a minor role in the process of ethnic identity formation. The above submissions suggest that religion and ethnicity can differ in terms of the strength of relationship, and also in terms of meaning as well, thereby potentially leading to different degree of linkages between the two components. The debate over the authenticity of ethnic revival and religious revival comes into view based on the insights gained so far (see, Hammond, 1988).

Overall, while religion and ethnicity might be important determinants of identity formation, it is likely the case that the influence of these two components in identity formation in the contemporary era is less pervasive and forceful than before. Here, the link between religion and identity will be reviewed with reference to youth's search for identity formation. Youths are more likely to struggle with identity cohesion, as they continually search for a sense of self. Basically, youths undergone this psychological journey so as to solidify and understand their experience of self as well as identifying and associating themselves with the familial, vocational and societal roles (Damon, 1983).

The search is characterized by cravings and behaviours that bind youths to or associate them with something outside and beyond themselves, while, jointly shaping their sense of singularity and independence. Religion, arguably at its best offers both (see, King, 2003). This implies that religion may potentially play important role in the identity formation of youths. Similarly, Erikson (1965) recognizes that religion is more likely to play an important role in a youth's identity formation. Specifically, he notes that religion is closely connected with an essential part of the socio-historical matrix that provides the needed platform for identity formation. Besides, he contends that religion is and remains the oldest and long-lasting institution that creates the enabling environment for the development of fidelity, attachment to an ideology that arises at the successful conclusion of the psychological crisis associated with identity formation (see, Erikson, 1968).

Erikson's insight suggests that religion provides both a transcendental viewpoint that helps to forge moral beliefs and behavioural modus operandi based on ideological platform. In addition, religious norms also play an important in transition of religious beliefs to a community of believers. This implies that religious beliefs, values and morals help to empower youths to better understand the world and their unique place in it. It is more likely that ideologies generated through religion helps to deepen one's understanding of events and experiences as well as associating meanings to these events or/and experiences (see, King, 2003).

Religion is more likely to play significant role in identity formation in a culture where youth confront a continually fluctuating social and political milieu. Essentially, the transcendent meaning derived from religious affiliation is important for a youth identity development and well-being. In the absence of the viewpoint available through religious beliefs, the worldview it provides, and its role in shaping and guiding behaviour, the multiplicity of choices and options accessible to modern youth is more likely to breed despair, hopelessness and confusion. Religion can potentially provide ultimate answers and viewpoints about elusive issues of life that might be more intriguing and pertinent for a youth (see, Erikson, 1964).

The existing literature on religion and identity is limited. However, evidence from few studies in the area suggests that religion is correlated with identity formation. For instance, religiosity is found to be relevant in explaining commitment and purposefulness in terms of identity formation (see, Tzuriel, 1984).

On related development, Fulton (1997) finds evidence of a positive relationship between high identity achievement and high religiousness scores as well as low extrinsic religiousness score. This suggests that identity achievement is highly related with internalization of religious commitment. Besides, there is evidence suggesting that religious attendance is related to identity commitment choices of foreclosure and achievement, whilst, identity diffusion is associated with lower rates of religious attendance (see, [Markstrom-Adams](#), et al, (1994).

On a slightly different note, Hunsberger et al (2001) find evidence of weak correlation between religious commitment and identity achievement. On the other hand, identity diffusion is found to be related with lower rates of church and temple commitments. Overall, religion tends to be a key determinant of identity formation depending on circumstances, the groups covered and the period covered in the analysis.

Conclusions

Little doubt exists over the strength of the relationship between religion and identity. Few studies in the existing literature report evidence of positive correlation between identity formation and religiousness. This essay explores the link between religion and identity from three viewpoints, namely: religion as expression of deep sense of unity and its linkage with identity formation especially in the context of Durkheim's insight; the link between religion and ethnicity in terms of forging identity formation; and the link between religion and identity formation especially with reference to youth's religiousness and search for identity.

Evidence from the existing suggests that religion is positively correlated with identity formation. This implies that identity achievement is highly related with internalization of religious commitment. Besides, there is evidence suggesting that religious attendance is related to identity commitment choices of foreclosure and achievement, whilst, identity diffusion is associated with lower rates of religious attendance. It is worthwhile to note that the strength of the relationship between religion and identity may depend on a number of factors such as: the intensity of religious commitment, the influence a community has on individual behaviour, the period covered, the demography being studied, among other factors.

Religion might serve as a powerful influence on an individual identity assuming that the person involved is deeply religious or significantly committed to his/her religion. The influence of religion on identity formation may also work through parental influence. Children whose parents are significantly religious are more likely to be significantly religious themselves. The commitment to religion and consequent influence on identity formation works through parental influence in this particular case.

The influence of religion on identity formation might also arise from community influence. Assume that members of a particular community are mostly religious. It would be the case that, most people would adhere to the norms of the community. If it is the case that the norms of the community is binding on most, if not all the members of the community, then, religion might play significant role in identity formation. The strength of the linkage also depends on the period covered. Religion seems to be more forceful in the olden days compared with the modern society. In the past, most societies tend to be deeply religious. This implies that the influence of religion on identity such societies would be strong.

This contrasts with the modern society in which religion still plays an important role, but, significantly lower compared with the past. The influence of religion on identity formation in this type of scenario may be lower, if any. Overall, religion tends to be a key determinant of identity formation depending on circumstances, the groups covered and the period covered in the analysis.

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