

UNIT 9

Religion in the Caribbean

Overview

In this unit we will explore and examine religion in the Caribbean. Learners can expect to learn the purpose of religion and traverse the complexities of the discussion on religion in the Caribbean. As in previous units, this unit builds on ideas and themes running through the understanding of human relations and interaction amongst themselves and social institutions. Key themes that should be reflected on include but are not limited to: ideas of syncretism in Caribbean culture, equality of persons regardless of religious or denominational choice and religion in contemporary Caribbean society.

Learning Objectives

By the end of this Unit you will be able to:

1. Explain the functions of religion in societies.
2. Identify religious practices in the Caribbean, including the development of Rastafarianism.
3. Utilize Caribbean social theory to explain the emergence of Afro-Caribbean religions in the Caribbean.

This Unit is divided into two Sessions as follows:

Session 9.1: The Purpose of Religion

Session 9.2: Religion in the Caribbean



Readings & Resources

Required Readings

Mustapha, N. (2013) *Sociology for Caribbean Students*, (2nd Edition) Module 2, Chapter 5) pp Kingston, Ian Randle Publishers. Available via [UWIlInC](http://search.ebscohost.com.library.open.uwi.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=668414&site=ehost-live) at <http://search.ebscohost.com.library.open.uwi.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=668414&site=ehost-live>

Recommended Readings

Barrow, C., & Reddock, R. (2001). *Caribbean Sociology: Introductory Readings*. Section 9, Chapters 40 and 41. Kingston: Ian Randle Publishers. Available via [UWIlInC](#).

Chevannes, B. (2011). Ships that will never sail: the paradox of Rastafari Pan Africanism. *Critical Arts: A South-North Journal of Cultural & Media Studies*, 25 (4), 565-575. Available via [UWIlInC](#).

Marshall, R., & Sutherland, P. (2008). The Social Relations of Bereavement in the Caribbean. *Omega: Journal of Death & Dying*, 57(1), 21-34. doi:10.2190/ OM.57.1.b. Available via [UWIlInC](#).

Paton, D. (2009). Obeah Acts: Producing and Policing the Boundaries of Religion in the Caribbean. *Small Axe: A Caribbean Journal of Criticism*, 13 (1), 1-18. Available via [UWIlInC](#) at <http://search.proquest.com.library.open.uwi.edu/docview/195808834/120172FF16CC48BCPO/1?accountid=42537>

Rocklin, A. (2015). Obeah and the Politics of Religion's Making and Unmaking in Colonial Trinidad. *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 83(3), 697-721. doi:10.1093/jaarel/lfv022. Available via [UWIlInC](#).

Seaga, E. (1969). Revival Cults in Jamaica. Notes Towards A Sociology of Religion. *Jamaica Journal*. 3. (2). Kingston. Available at https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B_juQVG0BKpPZINtbVg1TnJzNTQ/view?pref=2&pli=1

You are also advised to locate and read: Additional papers relevant to the topics covered.

Session 9.1

The Purpose of Religion

Introduction

Karl Marx (1843) famously described religion as 'the opium of the people'. In speaking of religion in this way he was seeing it as a tool used by the powerful in the society to manipulate the less powerful and make them comfortable with their disadvantaged location in the society. But he also saw religion as a tool that the same group of the less powerful in the society, particularly the working class, was able to use to challenge their marginalization from the centers of power.

Another definition of religion which we can consider is the one offered by Don Swenson (cited by Religious Tolerance.org):

Religion is the individual and social experience of the sacred that is manifested in mythologies, ritual, ethos, and integrated into a collective or organization.

Both of these definitions speak to institutionalized character of religion and, hence, its capability to shape social outcomes and values.

There are many events punctuating world history that, in some way, were influenced, related or associated with religion. The Reformation and Enlightenment and rise of Protestantism in Europe that transformed Europeans outlook of the world and began their outward venture into capitalism and the arrival of the Europeans in Africa and the Caribbean in some way related to the spread of religious dogma. (You might want to read more about this by researching and reading Max Weber and the Protestant Ethic and J.D. Fage's explanations about the History of Africa.) For the biblical referencing of mankind's time on earth, there are issues that have plagued and continue to plague religion such as the perceived superiority of religion denominations and religious beliefs. These issues have caused segregation of peoples, genocide and, in contemporary society, have manifested in jihads and clashes between eastern and western civilizations.

Religion serves to offer meaning to people about the universe and the world they live in. This is transmitted through principles and expectations that have also found themselves in the legal and governance structure of societies. These principles and expectations are key to social order and cooperation. For example, the exhortation of the Ten Commandments includes being good to neighbours and restraints to killing and stealing and these are supported by the conferment of individuals with rights to life, to property etc. This is further supported in our jurisprudence by the presence of sanctions for infringement of these rights and responsibilities to others.

But, religion, aside from providing the guidelines for moral demeanor in human interaction, has not been without criticism. It has been accused of reinforcing the status quo and justifying inequalities that marginalize and oppress certain groups in society. These criticisms provide a good platform for us to now examine the sociological perspectives on religion. We will do this in our first learning activity.

The Role of Religion

As you would you have been learning from the statements made in the overview to this unit, religion has a major social function and, as sociologists, there is much for us to examine and probe here.

Let us now look at some sociological perspectives through which religion has been framed.



LEARNING ACTIVITY 8.1

How Do We Explain Religion

After reading **pages 165-169** of Mustapha (2013) respond to the following instructions:

1. Develop your own working definition of religion.
2. Having reviewed the perspectives of religion offered by The Functionalist Approach and Conflict Perspectives, indicate which aspects in each appear to offer an explanation for the ways in which religion functions in your own territory.
3. Considering how religion works in your country, in no more than 180 words, discuss the relevance of the feminist argument that religion reinforces women's oppression. Provide evidence to support your response.

Session 9.1 Summary

In this session we learnt that:

1. Religion provides a meaning to life for persons and can provide a form of comfort to persons, especially when they are able to share common elements of religion: prayer and beliefs with others.
2. Religion has been regarded as reinforcing experiences of oppression by offering to people hope of better in life beyond death.
3. Religious belief has been linked to attitudes of contentment that has been associated with the type of ethic needed for the thriving of capitalism.

We will now move onto Session 9.2 which moves our focus from the general to the specifics of religion in the Caribbean region.

Session 9.2

Religion in the Caribbean

Introduction

We can utilize the common framework for understanding social relations in the Caribbean to also appreciate religion. This framework breaks down the experience of the Caribbean before emancipation, post emancipation and pre- and post-independence. We can also put advance the argument that within much of these periods, the discussion on religion, revolves around expressions of repression, resistance and oppression. Over these periods, there has been continuity and assimilation of religious beliefs by the peoples who came to the Caribbean. In your first learning activity you will read and provide features of religion.

How Religion Functions in the Caribbean

In the history of the region from its conquest by the Europeans and even now in the period of political independence for most of the states of the Caribbean, religion has played a major role in politics, social arrangements and in providing an identity for people. There is a range of religions present in the region. This is why the region is described as being an example of religious pluralism. Let us learn more about them and their history.



LEARNING ACTIVITY 9.2

Reading and Discussion: Religions in the Caribbean

Read Mustapha (2013), Religion in the Caribbean, pp. 171-179.

Situating your response in the four eras of Caribbean history highlighted above, provide in the designated forum responses to the items listed below:

1. One feature of domination by a religious group or organization in each of the four periods spanning Caribbean social history. Support your response with scholarly references.

2. Two (2) examples of religious expression in the immediate post-independence era that celebrated African heritage and non-Eurocentrism in the practice of spirituality. [**Only one example is allowed from Jamaica.**]
3. In no more than 80 of your own words, provide notes on one ritualistic practice in religious worship that exhibits the blending of cultures, for each of two of the countries listed below.

• Trinidad • Jamaica • St. Lucia • Belize

When you're done, share and compare notes with at least one colleague in the designated forum.

The exercise you have just completed ought to have helped you to understand the ways in which religion has functioned in the Caribbean, both for good and for ill. The matter of the plurality of religions in the region and the ways in which tolerance is articulated, ignored or challenged.

Gender and Class in Religions in the Caribbean

We have been saying throughout this course that gender (as a system), gender roles and gender politics are worthy subjects of sociological inquiry. This is no less true when we consider the ways in which religion harnesses and shapes gender ideologies that help men and women experience their faith. As we said at the very beginning of the unit, while religion reinforces oppressions such as women's gender oppression, it also offers opportunities to liberation, spiritual liberation, through the addressing of gender roles. Also intersecting with gender in religion in the Caribbean is the understandings of race: they are all mediated and understood through the filter of religion. To help you understand this better you should read **Chapter 40** of Barrow and Reddock (2001) which is listed in the Recommended Resources. In this chapter Austin-Broos discusses Pentecostalism and Rastafarianism and the ways in which gender, race and socio-economic class function within the framework of religion in the region. In **Chapter 41** of the same volume, Barry Chevannes discusses the ways in which Rastafarianism helps to uncover the racist attitudes and values of society and to offer a more enabling way of treating with racial identity.



LEARNING ACTIVITY 9.3

The State's Response to the Right to Worship

Based on the readings you have done so far for the unit, in a paragraph of no more than 120 words, evaluate the changing response of the state to the existence of any Afro-Caribbean religious group in respect of the issue of their right to worship. Use scholarly references to support your points.

When you are done, share your evaluation and comment on the post of at least one peer in the designated forum.

The activity you have just completed would have highlighted the contentious issues which are connected with religion. Some of these are legal issues, some have to do with issues of race, class and gender.

Session 9.2 Summary

In this session you would have explored the dynamics of religious practice in the Caribbean across four eras. This examination would have highlighted how religion as a social force was binding and divisive and was a great form of social control used by the planter class/colonials to maintain status quo in Caribbean societies. The social control included controls and ideologies related to gender, race and socio-economic class. The key themes explored included inclusion vs exclusion and coping responses of those who sought different rules and meanings of social consciousness to determine their way of life.

UNIT SUMMARY

The unit provided an understanding of the functions of religion most seen through the lens of the sociological perspectives. In this regard we can close the unit with a few take-away points.

1. Religion has offered meaning to people about the universe and their sense of purpose in life. This is of course controversial for some, who believe that all of this meaning is a form of control and added to that, only benefits a few.
2. Thinking about the beginning of religion in the Caribbean from the coming of the Europeans is a gross mistake. The Amerindians had their own religious beliefs influenced by animism for example.
3. There is some truth to religion being a form of control. Many of the religious laws, such as those laid out in the Ten Commandments and considered to be natural are represented in the codified laws of countries everywhere. An example of this is, 'Thou shall not kill'. Religion also shapes the ways in which men and women understand and perform their gender roles.
4. Caribbean societies have been filled with resistance to religion brought by the Europeans. The development of Afro-Caribbean religions, including Rastafarianism in Jamaica is a good example of this.

References

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- Moore, S., Chapman, S., Holborn, M., & Haralambos, M. (2013). *Sociology Themes and Perspectives*. Harper Collin Publishers, pp.430-445.
- Religious Tolerance.org. Definitions of the word 'religion' by academics etc. Retrieved from http://www.religioustolerance.org/rel_defn2.htm
- UWIDEC. (1997). Introduction to Sociology: Social Sciences Reader, Unit 10. Barbados: University of the West Indies Distance Education Centre.