

Religious Socialization

Notes on *Religion in Contemporary Society*, 2nd Edition, 1987, Chalfant *et al.*

Not for Quotation, material not properly cited.

Socialization is important in transmitting religion to new members of the faith, young and not-so-young. The learning process is life-long, but the primary foundation is laid down early in life when religious identity forms. Later, secondary socialization builds on the primary socialization, and therefore reflects the primary, i.e., adds to and modifies what came first. For most people, religion is acquired gradually. For some it can be acquired rapidly, even as a sudden conversion to a religious perspective on life.

Johnstone (1983) categorizes the process into 4 steps:

1. the organization attempts to induce commitment in the individual
2. assuming commitment, the organization next attempts to instill its norms in the individual
3. assuming the norms are accepted, the organization attempts to cement them securely in place such that the norms will be followed even when the individual is not with the group
4. this process becomes more routine and periodic, to maintain individuals established commitment over the long haul

There are formal and informal mechanisms at work in religious socialization. Agents of socialization are many and varied. There are 3 major types of agents: family, peers, and church.

1. Family: the most important and enduring influence--the first and most fundamental influence on the individual, at a time of life when one is most susceptible, lacking in knowledge or experience, emotionally and intellectually dependent on others. Families not only take their children to "church," but also act out religious ceremonies at home. Baptisms, weddings, funerals, confirmations, etc., have important socializing functions as families affirm their religious commitments. Informal practices and habits are as important as formal practices. Such practices as going to church, saying grace before meals, etc., are augmented by linguistic habits and attitudes toward religion and religious issues. The topics of conversation in the family, and the social life of the family, to the extent that they revolve around religious concerns, are an important socializing aspect of family life. The involvement of the family in a wider, religious community further emphasizes religion in the socialization process.

2. Peers: Early experience sets the stage for later interests, and for how the child reacts to religion in its many guises, later in life. Family influence wanes during adolescence, and peer influence takes over as the focus of intimacy and attitude sharing. Peer acceptance is a powerful incentive, and it loosens adolescents' identification with parents. Yet peer group socialization is superficial and transitory in adolescence, revolving around dating and socializing. Adolescence is a critical period of recruiting for churches. Many individuals stop attending church if attendance is not supported by peers and the wider community. College experience also affects attendance, habits, and beliefs, tending toward more general views on religion--less particularism, a widening of one's religious horizon.

3. Church Early adulthood through middle age is a time of mixed results, depending on life style, occupation, region, etc. Adults exercise greater choice over their social environment.

The elderly, however, participate proportionally more in religion than other age groups. This is partly because churches offer a social life, and for some, because death is approaching, making religion more relevant. Much of what happens in later life depends on what happened in earlier life.

The churches socialize people actively, emphasizing norms and values more than most families or peer groups outside of churches. Once a faith is acquired, it is best maintained by limiting contact to others of a similar faith. Modern churches offer a wide array of activities which have the latent effect of reinforcing faith among those who participate. Some churches emphasize education of the young in special schools which reinforce religion at the same time they provide a secular education. The religious effects of parochial schools depend, however, on family emphasizing religion.

Conversion is a sudden change in religious orientation, which may or may not have a lasting effect. It is related to 3 factors:

- a. group context the younger are led to the experience by the older members
- b. age conversion is primarily, though not exclusively, an adolescent or young-adult experience, often related to emergence of sexuality and adult responsibilities, focused on themes of sin, guilt, anxiety, and forgiveness.
- c. conversion involves stages in a process which may culminate in the formation of a new religious identity.

Conversion can be viewed as a form of resocialization involving unlearning as well as new learning.

Lofland and Stark's Model

1. experience of tension and need
2. in a religious problem-solving context
3. with a self-concept of a religious seeker
4. at a turning point in life where old ways of handling tensions don't work any more
5. coming into contact with members of a faith which is relevant to problems
6. forming affective bonds with members of that faith
7. weakening of ties with previous social life
8. intensification of interaction with members of the new faith
9. leading to acceptance and commitment to the new faith, taking on an active role in the faith

Members of a faith actively recruit, attempting to "pick-up" newcomers, get them "hooked" on the faith, "encapsulating" them by surrounding them with the ideology and with other members of the faith, emphasizing affective, "love" relations with other members, isolating them from their previous social life, surrounding them with intense, emotional support, leading individuals to work for the faith and to commit themselves to the life of the group.

Most converts are people who have been exposed to religious issues at an earlier time in their lives, and have drifted away from religious concerns, and are returning to a religious perspective previously familiar, though with some new twists, so to speak.

The individual is not a passive responder to social forces, but rather is an active seeker who finds a group whose ideology strikes a responsive chord within.