

Durkheim emphasized on the functional aspects of religion. However, we observe many instances of religious extremism in Pakistani society. Shed some light on the phenomenon.

Answer

1) Introduction

Emile Durkheim, being a structural functionalist, emphasized on the functional aspects of every societal institution including the institution of religion. According to him religion was perhaps the most significant tool for promoting social solidarity. However, he also shed light on the rare instances where dysfunction of religion can lead to chaos, disunity and strife. This is exactly what's happening in the Pakistani society. Underlying faults within the institution of religion are causing religious extremism in Pakistan.

2) Durkheim's Sociology of Religion:

Although Durkheim was himself an atheist and denounced the role of religion or spiritualism in social life, he did realize later that religion is a crucial factor in ensuring the social cohesion.

a) Religion is like worshipping the society

In one of his last book, 'The Elementary Forms of Religious Life', Durkheim explored the role of religion through the study of 'Totemism' of Australian Aborigines.

Aborigines pick an object as a symbol of their clan and offer collective worship to that symbol. In this way their religious rituals become a way of worshipping the clan itself.

He said :-

"Divinity is merely society transformed and symbolically conceived."

3) Religious Extremism in Pakistan

In contrast to the role that Durkheim associates with religion, we see extremist forms of religion burgeoning in the Pakistani society. Instead of uniting the people, extremism is marginalizing the minorities and turning the major factions against each other.

4) How Durkheim explains it :

While his major focus was the functional aspects of religion, he did warn that an ~~or~~ dysfunction may also occur which could undermine social solidarity. He was of the view that this dysfunction could be the result of an underlying issue within the society.

5) Causes of Religious Extremism

An sweeping look at the society reveals various causes of religious extremism in Pakistan:

a) Use of Religion for Political motives

Use of religion for rallying people and getting their political support has been one of the greatest cause of rising extremist element in Pakistan.

b) Influence of Extremist Elements on Seminaries

Unmonitored growth of religious seminaries especially in the illiterate tribal areas has allowed extremist element to take hold in those institutions.

c) Lack of Ijma and Ijtihad

Ignorance of these two tools that Islam has given us to find modern solutions to our modern problems has been another factor in the rise of extremism.

d) Failure to adjust to Modernism

Failure of the illiterate masses to adjust to the demands of modernism has led to hardcore extremist ideologies. People look towards religious scholars and Imams to help them find a balance. But unfortunately, scholars have been misusing their position by misleading the public.

6) Manifestations of Religious Extremism:

In the last 2 decades, Pakistan has seen extreme manifestations of religious extremism.

a) Sectarian clashes

These are because every sect has been insisting on applying their religious interpretations on the larger public. The rise of sectarian clashes is another indication that religion has failed to promote the spirit of tolerance in the public.

b) Resistance of Government policies in Population planning and health sector

This resistance is extremely prominent in the tribal areas of KPK and Balochistan where the extremists have a strong public acceptance. Government policies like family planning and birth control initiatives have been highly resisted. Moreover, polio vaccines has been linked with fertility issue and so people are resisting efforts that government makes to eradicate polio.

c) Extremism against non-muslim minorities

Islam and other religions promote pluralist model of integration where people from all ethnicities, races and religions are allowed to co-exist. However, religious extremist are following differentialist models in their treatment of Sikh and Hindu and Christian minorities.

d) Ideology of Suicide Bombing

This ideology has been deployed in Pakistan more than any other region of Southeast Asia. According to this

Ideology everyone that does not correspond to your religious ideology is liable to be killed.

7) Restoring the function of religion

Correction the dysfunction and restoring the uniting function of religion demands following steps -

i) The role of religious scholars is to be regulated.

ii) Nationalism needs to be promoted to bridge the gap between different ideological differences.

iii) Religious seminaries need to be registered under government regulations.

iv) Ijma and Ijtihad need to be used to reconcile differences between different sects and ideologies.

8) Conclusion

The role that Durkheim envisioned for religion was that of promoting social solidarity. This role is not commonly observed in Pakistani society due to the rise of extremism. However this dysfunction can be corrected via active policy action on part of the government and religious scholars.