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Socialization

As animals inhabiting symbolic universes, not least religious ones, human beings endow the world with meaning to explain what belongs to what, what differs from what, what is good and what is bad. While these symbolic universes are human-made, they are not constructed on a personal basis. They precede and transcend individuals, who internalize them through processes of socialization. Besides the families people grow up in, and the schools they attend, a wide range of other agents is involved in the process, often latently rather than manifestly.

Religious socialization occurs not only in the early life stages within the family, but also later on through socializing agents like schools, peer groups and media. That the family nonetheless plays a crucial role can be seen from the fact that those raised in non-religious families only very occasionally turn to religion later in life, which does however not mean that those raised in religious families necessarily stick to religion. Especially in secularized Western-European countries a substantial part of those originally raised in religious families nonetheless drop out later on, typically after having left the parental home and the social control that came with it.

Long-term successful religious socialization in the family depends heavily on the influence of socializing agents encountered later in life, especially whether the latter affirm or contradict what has been learnt in the family, which is why religious parents typically prefer their children to attend religious schools. While many of the agents of socialization beyond family and school do not primarily aim at socialization, they nonetheless have an influence that is in effect more latent (hidden and unintended) than manifest (overt and intended). While it is virtually impossible to attain perfect religious congruence between the family and school climates on the one hand and the world beyond these two on the other, Catholics and Protestants in countries like Belgium and the Netherlands came a long way in accomplishing such a condition in the decades before the 1960s. In these back then massively pillarized societies, these groups managed to sustain the plausibility of their religious outlooks by providing their own schools, universities, broadcasting organizations, political parties, and trade unions, as well as a wide range of hobby clubs, sports clubs, choirs and music associations. In doing so, they catered for plausibility structures that prevented believers from becoming socialized into competing worldviews.

Sociological research into religious socialization traditionally features two major blind spots. The first one is a marked tendency to forget that becoming a non-religious person, just like becoming a religious one, also entails socialization, albeit in a non-religious rather than a religious worldview. While understanding the adoption of a religious worldview as impossible without socialization, religious apostasy, i.e., conversion from a religious to a non-religious worldview, has as such often been construed as somehow occurring more ‘naturally’ and ‘automatically’, i.e., without a need for explanation in terms of socialization. This problematic and remarkable asymmetry betrays sociology’s positivist roots in Enlightenment thought, according to which religion and belief are less rational and less natural than science and reason, and are for that reason doomed to be superseded by the latter.

Sociology of religion's second blind spot concerning socialization relates to the type of post-Christian spirituality that has disseminated in the West since the 1960s. While sociologists of religion nowadays generally acknowledge this spread, the socialization processes that have propelled it still tend to remain a matter of speculation. This is mostly due to post-Christian spirituality's alleged privatized and individualized character, i.e., the alleged non-existence of a shared and coherent spiritual worldview, a condition that is held to make socialization both impossible and unnecessary. Such a characterization of post-Christian spirituality is not only accepted by those who construe it as confirming secularization theory, but also by those who sympathize with its detraditionalized emphasis on personal experience as a source of spiritual wisdom and insight.

With its consistent insistence on the need to follow one's personal spiritual path and to take one's personal experiences seriously, post-Christian spirituality caters to felt needs of dealing more effectively with late-modern exigencies, complexities and psychological burdens. The spiritual trainers, coaches and therapists who are involved in this tend to adopt subtle, therapeutic, and coaching-style types of socialization, which not only lead them away from overly manifest practices of socialization, but also make these socialization processes more complex and more difficult to grasp than those in the case of Christian worldviews. For socializers here invoke socializees' own experiences to train them how to understand the latter as emanations of a spiritual self that lies hidden within. Once acquired, such a spiritual understanding of the self then brings forth new spiritual experiences, leading knowledge and experience to develop in tandem.

While much of such socialization takes place in spiritual centers, the latter cater mostly to those who have already internalized a spiritual worldview, or have at least become significantly receptive to it. Given post-Christian spirituality's massive dissemination in the past half century, it is therefore likely that more latent socialization processes do also play a

major role. While research into this is still in its infancy, today's plethora of magazines and self-help books about lifestyle, food, and health (including women's magazines paying attention to wellness and psychological wellbeing), probably constitutes a significant avenue for priming interest in spirituality. Furthermore, courses that do not look particularly spiritual at first sight may nonetheless constitute important trajectories to the acquisition of a spiritual worldview. Principal examples are work-related training programs that encourage employees to liberate themselves from strict supervisory regimes by thinking of themselves as proactive, flexible, and self-governing subjects who are capable of managing themselves in an endless quest for professional excellence. While inspired by the work of Foucault such courses have often been identified as adapting employees to neoliberal capitalism's need for flexibility and self-governance, they may indeed also play a major role in motivating employees to further immerse themselves into spirituality.

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Cross-references

Education

Individualism (including individualization)

Pillarization

Privatization of religion

Secularization (including secularism)

Spirituality

Further readings

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