**Social Institutions**

A social institution is a complex, integrated set of social norms organized around the preservation of a basic societal value. Obviously, the sociologist does not define institutions in the same way as does the person on the street. Lay persons are likely to use the term "institution" very loosely, for churches, hospitals, jails, and many other things as institutions.

**Definitions:**

A typical definition is that proffered by Jonathan Turner (Turner 1997: 6): “a complex of positions, roles, norms and values lodged in particular types of social structures and organizing relatively stable patterns of human activity with respect to fundamental problems in producing life-sustaining resources, in reproducing individuals, and in sustaining viable societal structures within a given environment.”

Again, Anthony Giddens says (Giddens 1984: 24): “Institutions by definition are the more enduring features of social life.”

He (Giddens 1984: 31) goes on to list as institutional orders, modes of discourse, political institutions, economic institutions and legal institutions. The contemporary philosopher of social science, Rom Harre follows the theoretical sociologists in offering this kind of definition (Harre 1979: 98):

“An institution was defined as an interlocking double-structure of persons-as-role-holders or office-bearers and the like, and of social practices involving both expressive and practical aims and outcomes.” He gives as examples (Harre 1979: 97) schools, shops, post offices, police forces, asylums and the British monarchy.

**Primary Institutions**

The basic and most prominent of all the Social Institutions, it is from here that all other institutions related to an individual are decided. In elaboration, the major primary institution that is recognized by all is listed as following:

**Family Institution:**

**The Family**

The family is the most basic of all social institutions. It existed among our ancestors long before the human species evolved to its present physical form, and it remains the basic social unit in every society. Though, family is an important social institution and it remained important in the past too but what is the future of this important institution. Several modern sociologist believe that the functions the family performs in the society are very important. With such functions the existence of the family cannot be vanished. There seem little variations in the functions but are sure about the need of the family to the society. But, on the other hand, Tofler, in his book, “The Future Shock”, writes that keeping in view the changing trends in the values and norms of the society, some institutions will be no more required. Particularly, about marriage as an institution, he perceive “Perhaps we are the last married generation.”

What exactly is a family? Our idea of the family tends to be a very ethnocentric one, because it is often based on that middle-class ideal family so faithfully portrayed on TV commercials. We usually think of a family as consisting of a husband, a wife, and their dependent children. This particular family pattern, however, is far from typical. It is, in fact, a relatively recent development in human history.

**Definition and Characteristics of the Family:**

First, family consists of a group of people who are in some way related to one another. Second, its members live together for long periods. Third, the adults in the group assume responsibility for any offspring. Fourth, the members of the family form an economic unit – often for the production of foods and services (when the members share agricultural tasks) and always for the consumption of goods and services. We may say that the family is a relatively permanent group of people related by ancestry, marriage, or adoption, who live together and form an economic unit and whose adult members assume responsibility for the young.

We lead our lives in two kinds of families. One is the family of orientation, into which we are born and the other is the family of procreation, which we later create ourselves. In every society marriage is the foundation of the family. Marriage is a socially approved sexual union of some permanence between two or more people. This union is usually inaugurated through some socially approved procedures. The offspring from such a union is considered legitimate, because their parents – both mother and father – are known and they both take the responsibility of the care and protection of the infant. Children born into a family that has not been formed through marriage may be considered illegitimate, because although their mother is known, there may be nobody to assume the social role of father.

The family is a unit within a social network of relatives, or kin. *Kinship refers to a network of people created by common ancestry, adoption, or marriage.* In traditional societies, kinship provides important basis for social organization. In modern societies kinship looses its importance. A kinship network is a highly complicated affair, as you will know if you have ever tried to construct your own family tree. Your primary relatives – mother, father, brother, sister, spouse, daughter, and son — give a total of seven possible types. Your secondary relatives — the primary relatives of your primary relatives, excluding your own primary relatives – provide 33 additional types, ranging from mothers-in-law to nephews.

**The Functions of the Family**

The family performs several basic social functions which are imperative for the maintenance of the entire social order.

***Regulation of Sexual Behavior:***

No society allows people to mate at random, and no society regards sexual behavior purely as a matter of private choice. The marriage and family system provides a means of regulating sexual behavior by specifying who may mate with whom under what circumstances they may do so.

***Replacement of Members:***

A society cannot survive unless it has a system for replacing its members from generation to generation, the family provides a stable, institutionalized means through which this replacement can take place, with specific individuals occupying the social roles of mother and father and assuming defined responsibilities.

***Socialization:***

Newborn infants do not become fully human until they are socialized, and the primary context for this socialization is the family. Because the child is theirs, the parents normally take particular care to monitor its behavior and to transmit to it the language, values, norms, and beliefs of the culture. Although many of these socialization functions have been taken over by other institutions in modern society — such as education, religion, or entertainment – the family remains the earliest and the most significant agency of socialization.

***Care and Protection*:**

The family is able to offer the care, protection, security and love that are vital to its members. Infants need warmth, food, shelter, and affection. The family provides an intimate atmosphere and an economic unit in which these needs can be provided. The adult family members, too, provide one another with material and emotional support that cannot be readily obtained outside the family context. The productive members take care of those who, owing to reasons of age or other incapacity, cannot care for themselves.

***Social Placement*:**

Legitimate birth into a family gives the individual a stable place in society. We inherit from our family of orientation not only material goods but also our social status.-We belong to the same racial or ethnic group and usually to the same religion and social class as our parents belongs to. Our family background is the most significant single determinant of our status in society.

**2. Religious Institutions**

In viewing religion as an institution, sociologists evaluate its impact on human societies. As an institution, religion has operated to standardize the religious emotions, beliefs and practices, and to spread and perpetuate them. It is a powerful instrument of social control and social integration.

It is a strong bond of social unity through promoting a community of thought. It deals with divine sanctions as well as with present and future rewards and punishments. Through this, it exercises a profound influence on one’s behaviour.

In viewing religion as a social institution, sociologists have also evaluated its impact on individuals and society as a whole. As an institution, religion is characterized by its universality, its rituals, its sacredness and its persistence.

Religion can be viewed from individual and societal points of view both. The functions of social cohesion and social control are oriented towards the larger society while providing emotional and social support and other psychological explanations are more oriented towards the individual.

Although religion, like all other institutions, has changed, it continues to be a potent force, rather with more vigour in our lives throughout the modern neo-liberal risky world. The assertion that ‘God is dead’ is not true for a large part of world’s population.

Despite the incredible growth in the importance of science and empiricism since 19th century, which has caused many people to regard religion as a superstition, an irrational belief and religiously and spiri­tuality among people is increasing in some or the other way. At many times, religion persists in the face of scientific evidence.

Even, the men who call themselves as scientists are not fully devoid of religious beliefs and they take part in many religious rituals in the home as well as at workplace. We often hear a doctor saying that he or she will do his/her best to save the life of the patient but it is ultimately He (God) who saves. This proves that religion has always been present and has also been a prominent institution.

In traditional societies the religious and non-religious spheres of life are not sharply differentiated. But, in modern industrial societies, religion and society are not the same. The emergence of different modes of life experience leads to different meanings about life, producing a religious differentiation. Religion may still provide cohesion, but now only for sub-groups of society.

**Functions of Religious Institution**

The structural-functional approach to religion has its roots in Emile Durkheim's work on religion. Durkheim argued that religion is, in a sense, the celebration and even (self-) worship of human society. Given this approach, Durkheim proposed that religion has three major functions in society: it provides social cohesion to help maintain social solidarity through shared rituals and beliefs, social control to enforce religious-based morals and norms to help maintain conformity and control in society, and it offers meaning and purpose to answer any existential questions. Further, Durkheim placed himself in the positivist tradition, meaning that he thought of his study of society as dispassionate and scientific. He was deeply interested in the problem of what held complex modern societies together. Religion, he argued, was an expression of social cohesion.

Religion, for Durkheim, is not imaginary, although he does deprive it of what many believers find essential. Religion is very real; it is an expression of society itself, and indeed, there is no society that does not have religion. We perceive as individuals a force greater than ourselves and give that perception a supernatural face. We then express ourselves religiously in groups, which for Durkheim makes the symbolic power greater. Religion is an expression of our collective consciousness, which is the fusion of all of our individual consciousness, which then creates a reality of its own.

It follows, then, that less complex societies, such as the Australian Aborigines, have less complex religious systems, involving totems associated with particular clans. The more complex a particular society is, the more complex the religious system. As societies come in contact with other societies, there is a tendency for religious systems to emphasize universalism to a greater and greater extent. However, as the division of labor makes the individual seem more important, religious systems increasingly focus on individual salvation and conscience.

The primary criticism of the structural-functional approach to religion is that it overlooks religion's dysfunctions. For instance, religion can be used to justify terrorism and violence. Religion has often been the justification of, and motivation for, war. In one sense, this still fits the structural-functional approach as it provides social cohesion among the members of one party in a conflict. For instance, the social cohesion among the members of a terrorist group is high, but in a broader sense, religion is obviously resulting in conflict without questioning its actions against other members of society.