

Durkheim's Typology of Functions Applied to the Catholic Church

As one of the world's largest and oldest formal institutions, the Catholic church plays an integral role in communities and individuals across the globe. A formal institution promotes collective behavior and reveals peoples' interdependence on one another through laws, mandates or other structures. In the case of the Catholic church, the Vatican and network of millions of Catholic churches worldwide provide the structure to facilitate collective behavior. However, as society evolves towards individualism, the church suffers declining participation and negative latent functions. This paper will give a general understanding of the functions of the Catholic church, and how they promote or discourage the cult of the individual in modern society, as they relate to Durkheim's theories.

The Catholic church's manifest function is to promote collective behavior through the development of a religious community wholeheartedly committed to the worship of a single God. Manifest function is the specific way in which a formal institution attempts to control the cult of the individual; in other words, its intended purpose.

The church's structure is critical in the fulfillment of its manifest function. Sunday mass and organized worship is one way the church promotes the collective. Members all congregate in a single, sacred place and worship together. This facilitates conversation and community engagement. In this way, each individual is able to tangibly see how they are connected to every other churchgoer. The church's environment is another key component to its manifest function. Shared art, religious images and the creation of a sacred, communal space give the individual a sense of being "lifted" out of their own mind and focused on God. In a way, church redirects a worshipper's focus from their everyday life and into something much more sacrificial. Required religious traditions, such as Baptism or confirmation, also provide shared experiences to each worshipper. Now with 1.3 billion followers, the church has an international network of churches that each follow the exact same doctrine. The use of the same religious doctrines further encourage the collective as it provides a base of common knowledge that is unique to Catholicism.

All of these aspects of the church work to control the cult of the individual - the idea being that every worshipper is committing to a greater power and something larger than themselves.

The Church's latent functions tell us more about how this particular institution functions within a larger community. They result as a byproduct of the formal institution, in this case, the church, trying to fulfill its manifest function.

One *positive* latent function is the church being a provider of education and literacy throughout the world. Historically, the church has helped promote literacy since reading the Bible is a required component of worship. The dissemination of the Bible by the church after the printing press was invented helped educate a larger portion of Europe and, later, the world. Today, the Church is the largest non-government provider of education¹. This comes as a byproduct of spreading the faith, which is part of the churches' manifest function. In trying to create religious communities, the Church spreads literacy and

¹ <http://oiecinternational.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/GCE-Report-2020.pdf>

schools built in the name of God. These schools, intended more as a test of the Church's good faith to the public, play a very practical communal role. They discourage the cult of the individual by giving a common education that everyone can relate to - it teaches people that they are all bonded by historical and societal commonalities.

Two *negative* latent functions of the church inhibit collective behavior - corruption and conflict with non-believers.

One way the Church controls the cult of the individual so successfully is by enforcing a strict power dynamic within the papacy. Popes, bishops and cardinals are given absolute power. A byproduct of this unquestioned power is internal corruption and greed. The molestation scandal that came about in Boston in 2002 revealed a continual pattern of corruption that went up to the Vatican. This pattern went on for years swept under the rug due to the papacy's need to maintain order and a good image. In this way, the Church's inherent structure is a blessing and a curse. The power dynamic needed to control the cult of the individual brings along with it corruption.

Conflict is a second negative byproduct of this institution. In prescribing that only *one* way of thinking is acceptable, the Church directly excludes a large proportion of the population. By simply existing, it is conflicting with other modes of thought. This is why holy wars have started between religions and groups of individuals. Literally, the church's existence causes major international conflict. The crusades or colonization in the name of spreading the faith are examples of this conflict. A more modern example of this could be any terrorism in the name of the faith. Essentially, there are flaws within the Church that feed into the cult of the individual. In the case of terrorism, an individual takes worship to the extreme by threatening and eliminating non believers.

Anomie occurs when an institution is at odds with itself. As sociologists, we must ask ourselves: is the institution in practice contradicting its original intentions? When analyzing the Catholic church, then, we should look at how it is simultaneously promoting collective behavior *and* the cult of the individual.

The Church follows anomie condition two where its manifest function is unfulfilled and its negative latent functions promote the cult of the individual. While the church succeeds in promoting collective behavior within its own community of believers, it fails to integrate many members of society who do not commit to the faith. Therefore the church is dysfunctional. As local communities become more ethnically and religiously diverse, the community created by the Catholic church directly conflicts with more individuals in society. While it's simultaneously bonding together its 1.3 billion members, it is also simultaneously pushing away individuals who aren't Catholic. The premise of Catholicism being that there is *only* one correct belief, this becomes a problem for the church as society undergoes extreme social change. Therefore, as society progresses, the Catholic church becomes more anomic.

Anomie drives society towards a cycle of infinite complexity in which new formal institutions are created to combat dysfunction in others. Other religious institutions as well as a mandatory public education system are ways in which society corrects for exclusion from the Catholic church. Despite its flaws, society will not get rid of the Catholic church due to the benefits it provides its followers and to the community.

According to Durkheim's initial theory, religious communities are inversely related to anomie. I'm interested in challenging this part of his theory. During the time of his writings, religion played a more defined and powerful role in society and individual communities. I can see how his French

perspective also influenced his theory since its population at the time was less diverse than the United States. United States immigration policy and religious freedom, I believe, have contributed to more anomic circumstances within the church. As religions deviate from one another, there is more room for conflict and a questioning of faith. It is harder for the church to maintain authority in the face of increasingly competing ideals and a changing social landscape where religiosity is a less important part of daily life.