



## Examining religion through a functionalist lens: A sociological analysis

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### Abstract

Sociology of religion is the study of the beliefs, practices and organizational forms of religion using the tools and methods of the discipline of sociology. Modern academic sociology began with the analysis of religion in Emile Durkheim's 1897 study of suicide rates among Catholic and Protestant populations, a foundational work of social research which served to distinguish sociology from other disciplines, such as psychology. The works of Karl Marx and Max Weber emphasized the relationship between religion and the economic or social structure of society. Contemporary debates have centered on issues such as secularization, civil religion, and the cohesiveness of religion in the context of globalization and multiculturalism. The contemporary sociology of religion may also encompass the sociology of irreligion (for instance, in the analysis of secular humanist belief systems).

Classical, seminal sociological theorists of the late 19th and early 20th century such as Durkheim, Weber, and Marx were greatly interested in religion and its effects on society. Like those of Plato and Aristotle from ancient Greece, and Enlightenment philosophers from the 17th through 19th centuries, the ideas posited by these sociologists continue to be examined today. More recent prominent sociologists of religion include Peter L. Berger, Robert N. Bellah, Thomas Luckmann, Rodney Stark, William Sims Bainbridge, Robert Wuthnow, Christian Smith, and Bryan R. Wilson. This paper aims to analyze the religion sociologically in general and through functionalist perspective in particular.

**Keywords:** Religion, sociology, supernatural, animism, sacred, profane, community, Church, functionalism

### Introduction

The question of the boundaries of religion and of its definition is particularly crucial in contemporary sociology of religion. This being said, Nadel was probably correct in arguing that any definition will entail an area of uncertainty. However, how can we know what has a bearing on religion when we do not know where the boundaries are in the first place? Goody points out that this procedure carries the danger of leaving the investigators' criteria implicit rather than opening them to general scrutiny (1961, p. 142). Clearly, no investigation can proceed without some conception of what the limits of the subject matter are and to avoid confusion it is better to make this explicit at the outset, even if such conceptions are imperfect and have to be altered in the light of deeper understanding.

In considering attempts to define religion, one point always to be borne in mind is that they are not always free from the influence of theoretical predilections and purposes. That is to say, what theorists think religion is often depends upon the explanation of it they favour. They do not just seek to demarcate the sphere of investigation but also to state or imply things within the definition which support their theoretical interpretation of it. Their definitions are couched in terms that exclude phenomena that would otherwise be thought to belong, but to which their theories do not apply, or which include phenomena that would not otherwise be thought to belong because their theories necessitate their inclusion. According to Ronald Robertson, Religion refers to the existence of Supernatural beings which have a governing effect on life. But, according to Malcolm Hamilton certain belief systems such as Buddhism donot contain a belief in supernatural beings. According to

Marxist, Religion is an illusion which eases the pain produced by exploitation and oppression (opiate of the masses). According to Feminist Perspective, Religion is a product of patriarchy, an instrument of domination and oppression. According to Rational Choice Theories, Religion is seen in similar terms to a market in which individual consumer choices are important in determining whether a particular religion is successful or not. Consumers of religions have choices to choose a religion. It rejects Secularism. Thus, defining religion is a tough and complex task.

The debates that occurred during the nineteenth century among anthropologists and sociologists will serve to highlight many of the central issues involved in the problem of defining religion. An early contribution was that of Edward Tylor who proposed what he called a minimum definition, namely 'belief in spiritual beings' (1903, p. 424). This definition was bound up with Tylor's account of the origins of religion in a system of thought which he referred to as animism – the belief that all things, organic and inorganic, contain a soul or spirit which gives them their particular nature and characteristics. The definition was soon subjected to criticism from those who objected to the emphasis of Tylor and others upon intellect and reason in explaining the origins of religion and who thought that emotions lay at the root of it. Marett objected to the emphasis upon 'beings' since he believed that the essence of religion lay in an experience of a mysterious and occult power or force which was associated with deep and ambivalent emotions of awe, fear and respect. Experience of this power or force pre-dated conceptualisations of spirits, deities, and so on (Marett, 1914). Others were unhappy with

the other aspect of Tylor's definition, namely, its focus on beliefs, pointing out that this ignored practices, which they considered to be more important than beliefs and the real essence of religion (Smith, 1889; Durkheim, 1915). Durkheim pointed out that belief in spiritual beings implied belief in supernatural entities but some systems of belief generally acknowledged to be religions, such as Theravada Buddhism, were not founded upon such conceptions. Central to Durkheim's own definition was a distinction between the sacred and the profane. Religion, he said, is:

A unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden – beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a Church all those who adhere to them. (1915, p. 47)

In its inclusion of practices as well as beliefs and its emphasis upon the group, this definition shows the influence of Robertson Smith who had argued that rituals are prior to beliefs which are little more than rationalisations of practices and who had emphasised the social and collective nature of such ritual. It was this eminently social (Durkheim, 1915, p. 10) character of religion which, in Durkheim's view, differentiated it from magic. Magic has no church, he argued. The magician has only his clientele with whom he individually deals. Religion is an affair of the community and entails a congregation or church.

Scholars within the sociology of religion and other related disciplines distinguish between different dimensions of religion. To formulate new dimensions can be seen as attempts at developing and amplifying definitions of religion. Some of the same dimensions are found among several scholars, although they also operate with different ones. In the late 1960s, the historian of religion Ninian Smart (1968) presented a set of classifications based on six dimensions. Three dimensions are labeled para-historical, meaning that they transcend the borders of history, as Smart says, with a somewhat ethnocentric formulation. These are the dogmatic dimension, the mythological dimension, and the ethical dimension. Then, three historical dimensions follow: the ritual dimension, the experiential dimension, and the social dimension. Another historian of religion, Eric J. Sharpe, has criticized Smart's classification and argued that the mythological and ritual dimensions can be excluded. They do not belong to "the intrinsic part of the structure of religion" that must be included to understand the phenomenon (Sharpe 1983: 94). Sharpe admits that mythology and rituals frequently occur in religious life, but so do regulations, music, and symbols. He concludes that religion has four modes: the existential, the intellectual, the institutional, and the ethical.

Durkheim, Marx, and Weber had very complex and developed theories about the nature and effects of religion. Of these, Durkheim and Weber are often more difficult to understand, especially in light of the lack of context and examples in their primary texts. Religion was considered to be an extremely important social variable in the work of all three.

### **Functional Perspective of Religion in General & Durkheimian in Particular**

Evolutionists such as Muller and Tylor attempted to explain religion in terms of human needs. Muller saw it as a means for satisfying man's emotional needs, Tylor saw it as a response to man's intellectual needs. Functionalists change the emphasis from human to society's needs. Society

requires a certain degree of social solidarity, value consensus, harmony and integration. The function of religion is the contribution it makes to meet such functional prerequisites. Religion makes contribution by creating social solidarity, value consensus and integration in various parts of society.

Emile Durkheim talked about Sacred and Profane. B. Malinowski says Religion promotes social solidarity by dealing with situations of emotional stress that threaten the stability of society. T. Parsons said Religion gives norms that control human action. Religion helps to provide the consensus that he believes is necessary for order and stability in Society. Durkheim's definition contains a functional element in referring to religion uniting followers into a single moral community, the church. Functionalist definitions are often characterized as 'inclusive'; that is to say they include a broad range of phenomena within the concept. In fact, by implication, anything which performs the said function or operates in the said way counts as religion even if not conventionally thought of as such. If religion is defined as that which promotes unity or social cohesion, then anything which does this is religion. This inclusiveness is often deliberate. Functionalist definitions are usually linked to a theoretical perspective which seeks to explain religion in terms of an alleged essential integrative role. Often such theorists claim that systems of values and beliefs such as communism, fascism and nationalism function in this way and include them in the category of religion. An example of an inclusive definition is that of Yinger: 'religion is a system of beliefs and practices by means of which a group of people struggles with the ultimate problems of human life' (1970, p. 7).

### **Emile Durkheim**

Durkheim's conviction is that all forms of religion essentially are the same. To study religion more closely, he wanted to examine the simplest and most primitive religion known, presuming it must represent the basic pattern for all religions. The *Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (1912) is based on existing studies of the religious life of the Australian Aborigines. In this book, Durkheim categorized all religious phenomena into beliefs and rites. Religious beliefs consist of conceptions, and religious rites of specific actions. Religious belief presupposes a classification of all things into two groups, the sacred and the profane, with religion embodying the sacred. Durkheim wants to interpret the meaning of religious beliefs and rites and conclude that when members of society participate in a religious rite, they are actually worshiping society. Society controls its members according to their physical strength, and gives them respect for a moral authority. Men get the idea that outside themselves exist one or several powers, which they worship in religion. These powers are symbolic expressions of a moral reality, namely society.

Emile 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.

In the fieldwork that led to his famous *Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, Durkheim, a secular Frenchman, looked at anthropological data of Indigenous Australians. His underlying interest was to understand the basic forms of religious life for all societies. In *Elementary Forms*,

Durkheim argues that the totems the Aborigines venerate are actually expressions of their own conceptions of society itself. This is true not only for the Aborigines, he argues, but for all societies.

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, which is our social life, 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 consciousnesses, 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, the more complex the religious system is. 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 (a subject that Durkheim treats extensively in his famous *Division of Labor in Society*), religious systems increasingly focus on individual salvation and conscience.

Durkheim's definition of religion, from *Elementary Forms*, is as follows: "A religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden – beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them." This is a functional definition of religion, meaning that it explains what religion does in social life: essentially, it unites societies.

Durkheim's sociology of religion was met with criticism when it first appeared. In the more empirically oriented critiques, questions were asked about the validity of Durkheim's work, especially related to his book on the elementary forms of the religious life. In this book, Durkheim based his analyses on collected ethnographic material on totemism in Australia, material that is considered insufficient by today's standards. Furthermore, Durkheim's use of the material is criticized, or the fact that he emphasized the probably untypical Australian case (Nielsen 1998: 148). Questions have also been raised if it is possible to extend the definition of the function of religion in a pre-modern society in Australia to the function of religion everywhere else in the world, and at all times. Some anthropologists have argued that he is not justified in seeing totemism as a religion. Most sociologists believe that Durkheim has overstated his case. Whilst agreeing that religion is important for promoting social solidarity and reinforcing social values, they would not support the view that religion is the worship of society.

The theoretical critique has primarily been directed against Durkheim's theory of society. As mentioned above, Durkheim was influenced by his contemporaries' view of society as an organism. According to this idea, society was perceived as an organic system where each part has functions that contribute to the maintenance of the system. It is difficult to explain such functions without including a conscious purpose. In this way, Durkheim's theory ends in teleology, where he presumes the existence of some form of

higher intelligence that creates aspects of society that will serve some form of purpose.

Many of Durkheim's central ideas came to have a profound effect on general sociology as well as the sociology of religion. Durkheim belongs to the school of early functionalism and he considered sociology to be the science of social integration. His insistence on the social dimension of religion has continued to inspire sociological and anthropological reflection on religion, as found in the works of Thomas Luckmann, Mary Douglas, and Daniele Hervieu-Leger.

### Conclusion

Religion is an individual as well as a group phenomenon. It consists of a body of beliefs, a set of practices and a range of moral prescriptions. Religion covers the entire span of human life, from birth to death. It helps in spelling out the goals of life and for their realisation, exercise powerful influence on the processes of socialisation and social control. Religion contributes to social cohesion, but in certain situations may also lead to conflict. The sociology of religion studies: the social contexts of religion, and the role of religion in shaping and reshaping the social order.

Religion is an extremely sensitive and emotive subject. It needs to be understood in the national as well as global contexts so that it is controlled and bridges of understanding are built between different religions. Most of us live in multi-religious societies, and the global society is multi-religious anyway. Recent history has shown that religion cannot be dismissed or wished away. It also shows that over-enthusiasm for religious revival could have grave consequences for the world order.

The functionalist perspective emphasizes the positive contributions of religion to society and tends to ignore its dysfunctional aspects. With its preoccupation with harmony, integration and solidarity, functionalism neglects the many instances where religion can be seen as a divisive and disruptive force. It bypasses the frequent examples of internal divisions within a community over questions of religious dogma and worship, divisions which can lead to open conflict. It gives little consideration to hostility between different religious groups within the same society, such as Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland. In such cases religion can be seen as a direct threat to social order. As Charles Glock and Rodney Stark state in their criticism of functionalist views on religion, 'We find it difficult to reconcile the general theory with considerable evidence of religious conflict. On every side it would seem that religion threatens social integration as readily as it contributes to it. The history of Christianity, with its many schisms, manifests the great power of religion not merely to bind but to divide'.

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