

# Sociological Theories of Religion

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**ABSTRACT:** The ideas of three early sociological theorists continue to strongly influence the sociology of religion: Durkheim, Weber, and Marx. Even though none of these three men was particularly religious, the power that religion holds over people and societies interested them all. They believed that religion is essentially an illusion; because culture and location influence religion to such a degree, the idea that religion presents a fundamental truth of existence seemed rather improbable to them. They also speculated that, in time, the appeal and influence of religion on the modern mind would lessen.

**KEYWORDS:** sociology, religion, culture, illusion, modern, human, society, fundamental, truth

## I. INTRODUCTION

### Durkheim and functionalism

Emile Durkheim, the founder of functionalism, spent much of his academic career studying religions, especially those of small societies. The totémisme, or primitive kinship system of Australian aborigines as an “elementary” form of religion, primarily interested him. This research formed the basis of Durkheim's 1921 book, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, which is certainly the best-known study on the sociology of religion. Durkheim viewed religion within the context of the entire society and acknowledged its place in influencing the thinking and behavior of the members of society.[1,2]

Durkheim found that people tend to separate religious symbols, objects, and rituals, which are sacred, from the daily symbols, objects, and routines of existence referred to as the profane. Sacred objects are often believed to have divine properties that separate them from profane objects. Even in more-advanced cultures, people still view sacred objects with a sense of reverence and awe, even if they do not believe that the objects have some special power.

Durkheim also argued that religion never concerns only belief, but also encompasses regular rituals and ceremonies on the part of a group of believers, who then develop and strengthen a sense of group solidarity. Rituals are necessary to bind together the members of a religious group, and they allow individuals to escape from the mundane aspects of daily life into higher realms of experience. Sacred rituals and ceremonies are especially important for marking occasions such as births, marriages, times of crisis, and deaths.[3,4]

Durkheim's theory of religion exemplifies how functionalists examine sociological phenomena. According to Durkheim, people see religion as contributing to the health and continuation of society in general. Thus, religion functions to bind society's members by prompting them to affirm their common values and beliefs on a regular basis. Durkheim predicted that religion's influence would decrease as society modernizes. He believed that scientific thinking would likely replace religious thinking, with people giving only minimal attention to rituals and ceremonies. He also considered the concept of “God” to be on the verge of extinction. Instead, he envisioned society as promoting **civil religion**, in which, for example, civic celebrations, parades, and patriotism take the place of church services. If traditional religion were to continue, however, he believed it would do so only as a means to preserve social cohesion and order.[5,6]

## II. DISCUSSION

### Weber and social change

Durkheim claimed that his theory applied to religion in general, yet he based his conclusions on a limited set of examples. Max Weber, on the other hand, initiated a large-scale study of religions around the globe. His principal

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interest was in large, global religions with millions of believers. He conducted in-depth studies of Ancient Judaism, Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Taoism. In *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1904/1958), Weber examined the impact of Christianity on Western thinking and culture.

The fundamental purpose of Weber's research was to discover religion's impact on social change. For example, in Protestantism, especially the "Protestant Work Ethic," Weber saw the roots of capitalism. In the Eastern religions, Weber saw barriers to capitalism. For example, Hinduism stresses attaining higher levels of spirituality by escaping from the toils of the mundane physical world. Such a perspective does not easily lend itself to making and spending money.

To Weber, Christianity was a salvation religion that claims people can be "saved" when they convert to certain beliefs and moral codes. In Christianity, the idea of "sin" and its atonement by God's grace plays a fundamental role. Unlike the Eastern religions' passive approach, salvation religions like Christianity are active, demanding continuous struggles against sin and the negative aspects of society.[7,8]

### Marx: Conflict theory

Despite his influence on the topic, Karl Marx was not religious and never made a detailed study of religion. Marx's views on the sociology of religion came from 19th century philosophical and theological authors such as Ludwig Feuerbach, who wrote *The Essence of Christianity* (1841). Feuerbach maintained that people do not understand society, so they project their own culturally based norms and values onto separate entities such as gods, spirits, angels, and demons. According to Feuerbach, after humans realize that they have projected their own values onto religion, they can achieve these values in this world rather than in an afterlife.

Marx once declared that religion is the "opium of the people." He viewed religion as teaching people to accept their current lot in life, no matter how bad, while postponing rewards and happiness to some afterlife. Religion, then, prohibits social change by teaching nonresistance to oppression, diverting people's attention away from worldly injustices, justifying inequalities of power and wealth for the privileged, and emphasizing rewards yet to come.

Although people commonly assume that Marx saw no place for religion, this assumption is not entirely true. Marx held that religion served as a sanctuary from the harshness of everyday life and oppression by the powerful. Still, he predicted that traditional religion would one day pass away.

### Results

The study of religion is a challenging enterprise which place quite special demands on the sociological imagination. In analyzing religious practices, we have to make sense of the many different beliefs and rituals found in the various human cultures. We must be sensitive to ideals that inspire profound conviction in believers, yet at the same time take balanced view of them. We have to confront ideas that seek the eternal, while recognizing that religious groups also promote quite mundane goals – such as acquiring finance or soliciting for followers. We should not only recognize the diversity of religious beliefs and modes of conduct, but also probe into the nature of religion as a general phenomenon.[9,10]

**Sociologist define religion as A CULTURAL SYSTEM OF COMMONLY SHARED BELIEFS AND RITUALS THAT PROVIDES A SENSE OF ULTIMATE MEANING AND PURPOSE BY CREATING AN IDEA OF REALITY THAT IS SACRED, ALL-ENCOMPASSING AND SUPERNATURAL.** There are three key elements in this definition:

1. **RELIGION IS A FORM OF CULTURE.** Culture consists of the shared beliefs, values, norms and ideas that create a common identity among a group of people. Religion shares all of these characteristics.
2. **RELIGION INVOLVES BELIEFS THAT TAKE THE FORM OF RITUALIZED PRACTICES.** All religions thus have a behavioral aspect – special activities in which believers take part and that identify them as members of the religious community.
3. **PERHAPS MOST IMPORTANT, RELIGION PROVIDES A SENSE OF PURPOSE – A FEELING THAT LIFE IS ULTIMATELY MEANINGFUL.** It does so by explaining coherently and compellingly what transcends or overshadows everyday life, in ways that other aspects of culture (such as an educational system or a belief in democracy) typically can not.

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What is absent from the sociological definition of religion is as important as what is included: **NOWHERE IS THERE MENTION OF GOD. In common sense WE OFTEN THINK OF THEISM, A BELIEF IN ONE OR MORE SUPERNATURAL DEITIES (the term originates from the Greek word for God), BASIC TO RELIGION, BUT THIS IS NOT NECESSARILY THE CASE.** Some religions, such as Buddhism, believe in the existence of spiritual forces rather than a particular God.[11,12]

1. Sociologists are **NOT CONCERNED with WHETHER RELIGIOUS BELIEFS ARE TRUE OR FALSE.** From a sociological perspective, **RELIGIONS ARE REGARDED NOT AS BEING DECREED BY GOD. But as BEING SOCIALLY CONSTRUCTED BY HUMAN BEINGS.** As a result, sociologists put aside their personal beliefs when they study religion.
2. They are **CONCERNED WITH THE HUMAN RATHER THAN THE DIVINE ASPECTS OF RELIGION.** Sociologists ask;
  - How is the religion organized?
  - What are its principal beliefs and values?
  - How is it related to the larger society?
  - What explains its success or failure in recruiting and retaining believers?
3. Sociologists are especially **CONCERNED WITH THE SOCIAL ORGANIZATION OF RELIGION.** Religions are among the most important institutions in society. **THEY ARE A PRIMARY SOURCE OF THE MOST DEEP-SEATED NORMS AND VALUES.** At the same time, **RELIGIONS ARE TYPICALLY PRACTICED THROUGH AN ENORMOUS VARIETY OF SOCIAL FORMS (SOURCE OF DIVERSITY IN SOCIETY).** Within Christianity and Judaism, **FOR EXAMPLE,** religious practice often occurs in formal organizations, such Asian religions as
4. Hinduism and Buddhism, where religious practices are likely to occur in the home or some other natural setting. **THE SOCIOLOGY OF RELIGION IS CONCERNED WITH HOW DIFFERENT RELIGIOUS INSTITUTIONS AND ORGANIZATIONS ACTUALLY FUNCTION. In MODERN INDUSTRIAL SOCIETY,** however, religions have become established in separate, often bureaucratic, organizations, and so sociologists focus on the organizations through which religions must operate in order to survive [13,14]
5. Sociologists **OFTEN VIEW RELIGIONS AS A MAJOR SOURCE OF SOCIAL SOLIDARITY. To the extent that RELIGIONS PROVIDE BELIEVERS WITH A COMMON SET OF NORMS AND VALUES,** they are an important source of social solidarity. Religious beliefs, rituals and bonds help to create a 'moral community' in which all members know how to behave towards one another . If a single religion dominates in society there is stability.[24,25,26] If a society's members adhere to numerous competing religions difference may lead to destabilizing social conflicts. Recent **EXAMPLES** of religious conflict within a society include struggles between Sikhs, Hindus and Muslims in India; clashes between Muslims and Christians in Bosnia and other parts of the former Yugoslavia; and 'hate crimes' against Jews, Muslims and other religious minorities in the United States.
6. Sociologists tend to explain **"THE APPEAL OF RELIGION"** in terms of **"SOCIAL FORCES rather than in terms of purely personal, spiritual or psychological factors"**. For many people, religious beliefs are a deeply personal experience, involving a strong sense of connection with forces that transcend everyday reality. Sociologists do not question the depth of such feelings and experiences, but they are unlikely to limit themselves to a purely spiritual explanation of religious commitment.[15,16]

Some researchers argue that people often **'GET RELIGION' WHEN THEIR FUNDAMENTAL SENSE OF A SOCIAL ORDER IS THREATENED BY ECONOMIC HARD SHIP, LONELINESS, LOSS OR GRIEF, PHYSICAL SUFFERING, OR POOR HEALTH** , explaining the appeal of religious movements, sociologists are more likely to focus on the problems of the social order than on the psychological response of the individual.[17]

#### IV.CONCLUSIONS

##### Critical assessment of the classical views:

1. Marx, Durkheim and Weber each identified some important general characteristics of religion, and in some ways their views complement one another. **KARL MARX SEEMS TO BE RIGHT TO CLAIM THAT RELIGION OFTEN HAS IDEOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS, SERVING TO JUSTIFY THE INTERESTS OF RULING GROUPS AT THE EXPENSE OF OTHERS: THERE ARE INNUMERABLE INSTANCES OF THIS IN HISTORY.** Take as an EXAMPLE the influence of Christianity on the European colonialists' efforts to subject other cultures of their rule. The missionaries who sought to convert 'heathen' peoples to Christian beliefs were no doubt sincere, yet the effect of their teachings was to reinforce the destruction of traditional cultures and the imposition of white domination. The various Christian denominations almost all tolerated, or endorsed, slavery in the United States and other parts of the world up to the nineteenth century. Doctrines were developed that claimed slavery was based on divine law, disobedient slaves being guilty of an offence against God as well as their masters.[18,19]
2. Yet **MAX WEBER WAS CERTAINLY CORRECT TO EMPHASIZE THE UNSETTLING, AND OFTEN REVOLUTIONARY, IMPACT OF RELIGIOUS IDEALS ON PRE-ESTABLISHED SOCIAL ORDERS. FOR EXAMPLE,** Despite the churches' early support for slavery in the United States, many church leaders later played a key role in the fight to abolish it. Religious beliefs have promoted many social movements seeking to overthrow unjust system of authority, playing a prominent part, for instance, in the civil rights movements of the 1960s in the United States.
3. **RELIGION HAS ALSO INFLUENCE SOCIAL CHANGE – OFTEN PROVOKING MUCH BLOODSHED** – through the armed clashes and ward fought for religious motives. **FOR EXAMPLE, KHALISTAN MOVEMENT, ISIS ETC.**
4. **THESE DIVISIVE INFLUENCES OF RELIGION**, so prominent in history, [22,23] find little mention in **DURKHEIM'S WORK.** Durkheim emphasized above all the role of religion in promoting social cohesion. **YET IT IS NOT DIFFICULT TO REDIRECT HIS IDEAS TOWARDS EXPLAINING RELIGIOUS DIVISION, CONFLICT AND CHANGE AS WELL AS SOLIDARITY.** After all, much of the strength of feeling which may be generated against other religious groups drives from the commitment to religious values generated within each community of believers.
5. Among the most valuable aspects of Durkheim's writings is his stress on ritual and ceremony. All religions involve regular assemblies of believers, which ritual activities also mark the major transitions of life – birth, entry to adulthood (rituals associated with puberty are found in many cultures), marriage and death [20,21]

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