



Durkheim and Weber on the Sociological Beliefs and Practices of Religion

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Abstract. Sociological history describes religion as a combined set of beliefs together with practices that human use to shape their actions in life. Essentially, holding the same belief can bind people together and identify them as belonging to a particular group. Over the past decades, sociologists have dedicated extensive research to deducing the social foundations of certain beliefs and practices as being religious. With such an approach, religion is considered as being social phenomenon as opposed to a psychological or theological spectacle. It is responsible for creating intimate connections with the existing social system.

Through the reflection on capitalism and culture, this study takes a deep dive at the sociological phenomena of religion and its impact on contemporary social ecology. It focuses on how Emile Durkheim and Max Weber posit their varied sociological methodologies in the study of religion. The study will first look at Durkheim's position of religion in his work "*The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*". Then, it will reflect on Weber's contribution to the religious discourse by taking a deep dive into his work "*In the Protestant Ethic and Spirit of Capitalism*".

Keywords: Sociology Culture · Sociology Theory · Durkheim · Marx Weber · Religion

1 Introduction

Classical sociology considers religion study as being dedicated towards establishing how religion contributes to social order maintenance and the existent relationship between capitalist society and religion. A combination of these two issues raises concerns around capitalism serving the purpose of undermining religious commitment of people in society thereby destabilizing social cohesion. Hence, the consideration of the discussion being inclined towards an analysis of religious institutions. Durkheim considers society as the root to all foundational expressions and devotion categories of religion. He argues that religious worship is driven by a collective emotional experience that is informed by the power of society and the structure of society. In Durkheim words, "Religion is society symbolized and writ large. [1]" The original foundation of Durkheim's religion is best expressed in the totemism of Australian tribes. On the other hand, Weber is considered to have contributed to the modern position of religion. He progresses the idea of society being not only bureaucratic but also increasingly industrial, thus leading

to a rationalization where there is a shift in people's belief in God toward a secular basis. This foundation is best expressed in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, where the tenets of western society's markets is guided by Christianity. Weber progresses the idea of believers being detached from God and tasked with the responsibility of ascertaining their own salvation. In this article, Weber and Durkheim have different views on religion, and illustrate the development and reconstruction of social forces and social structures through the contrast between bureaucracy and industrialization.

2 Durkheim's Contribution to the Sociology of Religion

In Durkheim's writing, the *Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, Durkheim gets to explore the fundamental principles of religion, thus inferring that the various cultural symbols considered sacred by the community embody an aspect of power. In *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, he develops a discussion around the power held in religion and boils it down to an equation around totems and their connection to society. As part of the elaboration of the religious content, Durkheim provides varied illustrations of who holds power in various communities such as the *orenda* of the Iroquois people and the *wakan* of the Sioux community. The essential power considered in this case is considered to be the totemic power or, more simply, a god [1]. Totem thus can serve as a placeholder for underlying beliefs of religion that underpins a society. Durkheim describes this as, "At the origin and basis of religious thought...we find not definite and distinct object or beings that in themselves possess sacredness but indefinite powers and anonymous forces [2]." In this case, what is considered sacred is a conceptualization of the material forces of nature that are often talked about in traditional societies. Usually, these societies consider the force as being symbolized by a mythological figurine that is regarded as a totem.

Essentially, the totem is regarded as the physical representation of power, also the ideology of a particular tribe [2]. Such an understanding leads to Durkheim's conclusion of a particular totem symbol and society being one as the former is responsible for bringing people together within a community and thus driving moral order within a society. People are encircled (power portrayed) in a large ideology that produces religious circles. This is speculated as, "a very intense social life always does a sort of violence to the individual's body and mind and disrupts their normal functioning [2]." Embodied in this foundation is the idea of the totem together with any rituals that surround its existence as the sacred elements that define a society. In this way, the sacred elements receive a social order from a specific religion, to which people establish a sense of belonging. The same statement is held by Cesaire when making reference to the facilitative role religion plays to colonialism, "...am talking about societies drained of their essence, cultures trampled underfoot, institutions undermined, lands confiscated, religions smashed, magnificent artistic creations destroyed, extraordinary possibilities wiped out [3]." Colonialists were able to colonize states by coming first as evangelists and later turning to the people.

The work, *The Origin of Beliefs* positions Durkheim as a positivist traditionalist whose reflection of society is underpinned under a combination of scientific and dispassionate reflection. A large part of Durkheim's work revolves around the existence of religion and the tenets that guide it. Thus, totemism is considered to be the simplest form of religion. It is on the basis of such a belief system that a sacred and clear

distinction is established. From such basis, other religions are advanced through a combination of various myths, imagery worship, and traditions. The totem is once again considered as expressive of the sacredness as well as the original contributor for religious activity within a social group as it represents the identity. Such consideration leads to Durkheim's conclusion of religion being inevitable as is the case with society where people are regarded to stay together with common beliefs.

The primary foundation of Durkheim's discussion on religion was around the identification of its social origin, which was the driving force of unity and brotherhood of people in society. Religion sits as an ideal way in which people get to be recognized within the confines of an established society. This drive extends the identification of religious ties across cultures so as to see if there exists a denominator that is common to all. Durkheim argues that religion was initially the basis for a cohesive society, with people moving from a focus on their daily tribulations to a powerful common bright belief. He thus defined religion as, "...a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things... set apart and forbidden belief and practices which unite in one single moral community called a Church and all those who adhere to them [4]."

On this basis, Durkheim progressed the ideal of society being a preexisting condition of an individual thus the relative relation as protective measure to any threats evidenced towards the social order of society. In other words, religion is something that unifies the society, but with the collapse of religion, society does not ultimately collapse into a moral implosion. To a large extent, the focus of Durkheim's reflection around society is on the communal rather than individual experience that people derive from religion [9]. Accordingly, religious phenomena are considered to be the result of a separation between what is profane and sacred. The profane aspect relates to what we experience in everyday life and the latter makes reference to what is considered as out of the ordinary. Each activity in these two categories will vary from person to person. For example, Christians choose to use wine at communion while others neglect this type of practice. Those who consider the use of wine believe that it represents the blood of Jesus Christ. In such way, religion is regarded as divine entity that occurs within a specific social context. Considered herein is the attempt of historical accounts of people in the past being encouraged to subscribe to a civic morality that was driven by varied results of society. Overall, Durkheim's perspective offers a reflection of religion on the basis of three functionalities. The first function, disciplinary ideal, means to drive and administer discipline in society. Cohesive prospect is the second function that refers to people who gather to establish a strong bond guided by beliefs. The third function, vitality aspect, is reflected in elevating personal spirit and excitement, where people find inner peace through religion.

3 Weber's Contribution to the Sociology of Religion

In Weber's work, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Weber considers how religion extensively influence capitalism in society. Specifically, Weber argues that all countries with varied Christian denominations exhibit some aspects of social stratification between Catholics and Protestants. Protestants are usually regarded as being business-minded as well as skilled laborers. Catholics, on the other hand, are considered

as being simply content with being craftsmen and thereby generally lagging behind in the creation of wealth [5]. Weber attributes the ideal explanation to this phenomenon to mental rather than historical characteristics. The concern around Weber's position is rooted in the understanding of Catholics not being aggressive in the accumulation of wealth accumulation but Protestants-Calvinists, on the other hand, possess what Weber regards as the capitalist spirit. The justification around Protestant business ethics is a driving factor what Weber discusses about religion.

In essence, Weber considers the capitalist spirit as the urge of people who constantly put in more work for wealth accumulation despite the fact that they do not actually need more wealth. This is relatively different from the concept of capitalism, i.e., Benjamin Franklin's position of shrewd financial management under a moralistic code in which making money is seen as a personal moral responsibility [5]. Contemporaries consider Franklin's position as revolutionary but Weber, on the other hand, disputes it as the best description of greed. Weber instead proposes the ideal of traditionalism where people get to work so as to make money that is enough to simply sustain their living as opposed to growing profit [6]. Weber advances consideration of the Protestant ideal of 'calling' that is advanced by Luther under Protestant Reformation. Catholics promote a personal profession that is morally neutral and demonstrate their devotion to the religion by embracing a way of life that best reflects the monastic. In contrast, Luther advances the idea that the secular occupation held by a person extensively results in what he refers as a 'calling' [7]. People are assigned sacred duties by God, so they must make great efforts to ensure faith in God's teachings. Weber argues that such a position has no basis in the Bible, but is merely a craft of Luther and John Calvin [8]. He picks up the loose definition of 'calling' and sculpts it into today's Calvinism [8]. Under the Calvinism foundation, Weber speaks of the doctrine of predestination being the greatest contributor towards the capitalistic notion of Protestants [10]. Here, the individual is incapable of finding salvation independently, and therefore God chooses only one faction for salvation as providence.

Broadly speaking, Calvinist enthusiasts hope that they are the only faction chosen by God to guarantee their salvation. According to Weber, such a position leads to great insecurity as no one knows about his/her fate. It leads to a situation where Calvinists focus on leading virtuous lives that are free of emotions and guided by rationale in their everyday life, and in return Calvinists are regarded as sturdy business managers [5]. In contrast, Protestants held greater belief towards the notion of the 'calling' where it is considered that, people are destined to live a studious life that gets to manifest their divinity. Thus making them fully committed to the advancement of capitalism. To a great extent, Weber attributes much of the influence held by religion has been lost but the Protestant analogy is a great contributor towards the contemporary capitalistic system.

4 Comparative Reflection of Durkheim's and Weber's Sociological Positions on Religion

Considerations of Durkheim and Weber on religion establish their separate distinct foci on the basis of how humans relate with society to establish their sense of belongings.

On the one hand, Durkheim argues that society is predicated on its basic forms, where attention revolves around the relationships that exist in tribal societies [11]. Life under this case is considered as passive with ideas being shared by people of a specific community without any emphasis around historical accounts. This results in a situation where religion gets to overlap with community organizations. In the long run, religion serves a collective role of strengthening the social bond within a community [9]. Weber's focus, on the other hand, is tied around reflecting on the historical accounts of various religions across the world and their contributions towards economy. Protestantism itself is considered as a derivative way of thought from Catholicism [8]. In this way, Durkheim's work is around tribal religion as a visualizer for maintenance of social order, while Weber takes a shot at reflecting the role religion plays towards shaping people's thought and their actions.

5 Conclusion

This study reflects Durkheim's and Weber's sociological positions on religion. Durkheim embodies the totemism as a cultic representation of the primitive community and links it to an ongoing thought process. Under such paradigm, religion is an expression of the individual conscience, while totem worship represents a belief in the supernatural and is the common foundation of the clan. The beliefs and attitudes embodied by the clan are thus infused into individual life. Weber, on the other hand, perceives religion on the basis of economic and political factors, who emphasizes his understanding of how the Protestant ethic as a religious attribute contributes to contemporary capitalism. These comparisons can help scholars to further study in the fields of religion and social anthropology, and to have a newer understanding of social behavior and religious etiquette.

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