

**MAX
WEBER**



**EMILE
DURKHEIM**



THEORIES OF RELIGION:
A COMPARISON OF
TWO SOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES

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SOC 361: Sociology of Religion

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The sociology of religion is a science, just like any other science and deals with scientific procedures. The scientists who carry out these procedures are sociologists. However, unlike natural and physical sciences, one cannot truly set up a controlled experiment and repeat trials to test hypothesis, rather the methods used to study religion are sociological in nature. The subjects that can be studied include religious movements, social composition of adherents, and religious followers, while the data can include belief systems, religious practices or rituals, religious events, and so on. Nonetheless, this science is still quite difficult to study, and there are many problems that are inherent in studying religion. Essential to tackling this science is understanding how it has started and progressed over the years. In this paper, the religious work of the two founders of sociology, Elise Durkheim and Max Weber will be contrasted and compared. Comprehending the methodological approaches of these two sociologists will provide deep insight into the field of sociology of religion and help develop our own theories of religion.

Elise Durkheim was a French sociologist with a background in anthropology, and became known as ‘the father of sociology’. He lived from 1858-1917 and was educated in both France and Germany. Durkheim viewed religion as an essential part of one’s social life and went as far as to say that without religion society could not possibly exist cohesively. Religion, as ‘the cement of society’, is entirely a social concept.

Durkheim’s method in studying religion was based on the scientific method. It does not take into account specific beliefs or the origins of religions. Matters regarding the truth of religion are not accounted for, nor is there any such thing as a false religion. The fact that a religion has survived for so long gives the religion meaning, and that is central to the social dimension of religion. In his studies, Durkheim stressed the importance of the scientific method. He studied one subject or religion in depth before moving on to others to avoid making any apparent comparisons.

Durkheim's early 20th century works dealt with primitive religions. In looking at the most simplest cases of religion, the most primordial societies were found. His first major religious work, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, he looks at a primitive Australian society of Australian totemism. In this social order, tribes were divided into clans based on religious relationship between members, not family or kinship. Durkheim believes that this relationship was based on a sacred association between the clan, its members, and the totemic unit itself. Durkheim argued that the totemic units themselves weren't really the source of the religious admiration, but rather it was the experience of the group of people that generate the type of feelings that would sustain and uphold religion. The sacred is a uniform concept, just how it varies in religions, it varied in totemic units for the Australian primitive society. The totem symbolized the clan while the sacred reality was actually the clan or society itself. Likewise, the religions themselves symbolize the followers of a religion, but in actuality what is sacred is the community or society.

As a sociologist of religion, Durkheim studied religious patterns and trends and determined that religions forced developed from society. His findings were revolutionary. Religion served more than a set of laws; it was the basis of morality. From the need of moral regulation came religion, to control society. Religious phenomenon, were not reduced to simply beliefs, or rites, but rather included both. Religious beliefs were comprised of the profane, or worldly and secular every day experience, as well as the sacred, which lied somewhere beyond the profane realm. Rites were religious practices and activities. According to Durkheim, these beliefs and rites served as symbols of the society. Durkheim concluded that religion is nothing more than the collective forces of society over the individual.

Unlike most other sociologists of religion, Durkheim did feel that religion was real, and will survive. There was nothing illusional or deceptive of religion, and a strong religion will simply

ensure social solidarity.

Max Weber was a German sociologist, economist, and political scientist. He lived during the same time frame as Durkheim, from the late 19th to the early 20th century. Weber saw religion as fulfilling self-interest. Although not to the same extent as Marx, Weber did feel that religion was something that arose out of an individual need for life to have meaning. Unlike Durkheim, society was not central, but rather what was important to study is how different individuals of a religion relate to one another.

Weber's method was groundbreaking at the time because he refuted all previous understandings of history dealing with religion, particularly those of Marx, and of course, Durkheim. Nonetheless, he did share some similarities with his French colleague. Like Durkheim, he used a strict scientific outlook when studying the field, which helped to establish the field of sociology as an academic discipline.

In comparison studies, unlike Durkheim, who compared social entities, Weber used the notion of the individual and ideal-types. From his studies, Weber hypothetically created an ideal form, from whose characteristics can be taken from various individuals or events. Weber argued that no scientific process can account for every issue regarding his studies of sociology of religion. To make a generalized conclusion based on select specific data would be an injustice to the wide various arrays of all the different subjects and data available. He used ideal-types to solve this problem and to allow him to develop his own theoretical concepts that can be generally attributed to all people, only ideally of course.

Along with the use of ideal-types, Weber's goal of sociology of religion was to understand the individual impact of religion. While Durkheim stressed how religion caused society to remain interconnected and moral, Weber did not feel it was necessary to delve into the social function of

religion. The personal role of religion and its individual meaning was much more crucial. He refuses to allow the importance of religion to be reduced to something merely social. Max Weber believed that religions provided meaning for individuals who aspired it. Religious beliefs are an example of these self-interests. As far as Durkheim's society theory relates, Weber believed that the study of society and religion for that matter should be the study of the interrelation between individuals.

Weber argued that some aspects of religion influence individuals to act certain ways. For example, his controversial work entitled the *Protestant Ethic Essay*, of how Protestantism favors capitalism.

Weber did not disagree with Durkheim regarding the reality of religions or its future. Weber and Durkheim were in the minority of sociologists who believed that religion was real and sacred. They also agreed that religion did have a future, albeit for different reasons. While Durkheim thought religion was necessary for the society to exist, Weber believed that individuals who were religious would be influenced to take part in so called worldly affairs, and succeed, such as capitalist Protestants.

Elise Durkheim and Max Weber were not only the two founders of sociology, but also the founders of sociology of religion. These two men, from roughly the same time period and geography, approached their field with due scientific processes. However, while Durkheim viewed religion to simply the basis and entity of social function, while Weber refused reduce religion to a single theory, but saw the importance of religious ideas in the personal realm and the influences it could have not only to oneself but to other surrounding individuals. Both Durkheim and Weber attempted to interpret religion and its social composition, and understood the nature of its utmost real importance and role it would have in the future of humanity.