

REFRAMING ÉMILE DURKHEIM’S SOCIOLOGICAL APPROACH: FROM EXPLANATION TO MANIFESTATION OF RELIGION*

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Abstract

This article develops criticism of explanatory approaches and methods adopted in the academic study of religion, especially focusing on Émile Durkheim’s sociological approach. The study maintains that this approach is meaningful when understanding the manifestation of religion, but is not adequate to explain the causes of the emergence of religion. Explanatory approaches lead to overly simplistic definitions that are reductive. Drawing on Wilfred Cantwell Smith's idea of “faith and cumulative tradition”, the paper argues that Western definitions of religion are problematic and do not capture the diversity of global faiths. That includes Durkheim’s definition and sociological approach to religion. The paper suggests reframing Durkheim’s approach to understand how religion manifests. It argues that the core teachings of the religions are preserved and can be known by historical method, which is well elaborated by Durkheim himself in his work. Lived religions are shaped by historical, social, and cultural contexts. Durkheim believes that studying the

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elementary form of an indigenous religion reveals the universal origins of all religions, but this claim is challenged in this paper. Understanding the “simple form” of major faiths like Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam requires in-depth historical research into their foundational texts and the lives of their founders. Such understanding should not rely on speculative comparisons with contemporary present societies with elementary forms of indigenous religions. The article points out how groundbreaking teachings and early societal challenges contradict the notion that these religions are just reflections of collective consciousness. Instead of focusing on the origins of religion, sociological or anthropological approaches should reveal how sociological factors become essential to the cumulative tradition, influencing religion’s various theological, sectarian, and cultural forms. This change provides a deeper understanding, highlighting the dynamic relationship between fundamental religious truths and their changing societal expressions.

Keywords: Religion, Émile Durkheim, Social Construction, Manifestation

Introduction

Religion is a faith and cumulative tradition, as Wilfred Cantwell Smith has argued; it is because the various Western concepts and definitions of religion and their proliferation across disciplines have remained unsatisfactory, with shortcomings and controversies. In approaching the study of religion in a non-confessional theological approach, the widely accepted approaches in religious studies at secular universities are anthropological, sociological, psychological, etc. These approaches are based on explaining religion, therefore explanatory: i.e., why there is religion and where it has come from, and how it functions. However, understanding (interpretative) approaches are also present in a number such as theological, philosophical, phenomenological, hermeneutical, comparative, and literary (textual). For example, the phenomenological approach is aimed at

understanding religion without seeking to explain its origins; therefore, proponents of explanatory approaches accuse it of having a theological bias. A lot of scholarship and research in religious studies still comes from explanatory academic approaches to religion. However, I believe these approaches can be reframed in a way that can help in understanding the manifestation of religion instead of the explanation. This highlights a missing aspect of these approaches: how anthropological, sociological, and psychological factors have become embedded in religion's manifestation. The manifestation of religion refers to the concrete and observable ways in which religious beliefs and experiences are expressed in human life, both individually and collectively. It includes rituals, symbols, moral practices, institutions, and sacred narratives through which the sacred is made present and meaningful in everyday life. In this sense, manifestations are the visible and lived forms of religion, as distinct from purely internal belief or private faith. This perspective of the manifestation of religion will both assist theologians and traditional religious scholars and caution against equating the study of religion with the study of its adherents.

Therefore, at the beginning of the following discussion, I will briefly explain the understanding of religion, secondly a brief explanation of explanatory sociological approach to religion is presented focused on the theory of Émile Durkheim, thirdly, how this approach can be reframed in serving understanding the manifestation of religion for scholars in religious studies, both secular and confessional, and in conclusion, a summary of the main points will be offered.

What is Religion

One of the fundamental questions that many scholars have invested their efforts into is to have a clear, precise, and concise definition of religion. The urgency of doing so was partly because of their encounter with various religions

of the world that were practiced in Western colonies, such as India. And on the other hand, having a definition is also rooted in the Western mindset, which, in its scholarship, follows logic, analysis, and systemization. On this question, both confessional theologians and secular scholars of religion are divided. The theological definitions were Jewish-Christian centric, in which the belief in God was essential, but these definitions did not fit non-Godly religions or the religions in which belief in God is not central, such as Buddhism, Jainism, and Daoism, etc.

On the other hand, secular scholars in anthropology, sociology, and psychology of religion came up with their own definitions. For example anthropologist Edward Burnett Tylor defined religion as “the belief in Spiritual Beings” (Tylor, 1871/1958); sociologist Émile Durkheim stated that “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.” (Durkheim, 1995, p. 44); and psychologist William James defines “Religion, therefore, ... consists of the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine” (James, 1902/1985, p. 34). These definitions face a serious problem that is called reductionism; they are reductive in their nature and do not do justice to the essence, meaning, features, structure, etc. of religion.

Since attempting to define religion has remained futile, a prominent scholar of comparative religion, Wilfred Cantwell Smith, in his work *The Meaning and End of Religion* (1962), suggested abandoning the Western concept of religion, arguing that the term “religion” is a Western construct and should be replaced with a focus on personal faith and cumulative tradition. According to him, religion, as commonly conceived, is not an objective, timeless entity, but rather a dynamic interaction between cumulative tradition (the observable historical manifestation) and personal faith (the inner, lived experience of individuals) (Smith, 1962). Cumulative tradition refers to the external, observable

aspects of a religious tradition. It includes all the historical data, such as scriptures, rituals, architecture, art, music, doctrines, laws, and the collective history of a community. Personal faith refers to the internal, subjective experience of individuals, their personal encounter with the transcendent, their commitment, their devotion, and their way of apprehending ultimate reality. Wilfred Cantwell Smith's understanding of religion makes good sense as it is not reductive and applies across religions. Secondly, it comes true as his explanation of cumulative tradition is expansive, as it includes the basic sources of religion, such as scriptures, but along with that, what has been added to it throughout the history of religious people. Attesting to that is the fact that all religions, as they are lived and practiced in different parts of the world, are not monolithic, but plurality, flexibility, interpretations, and adaptations are present. However, there is a distinction which could be applied to Smith's concept of religion, and that is religion "as such" and religion "as it stands". Religion "as it stands" is a lived religion which is present, and it has come to the contemporary time throughout history, both by religious hermeneutics, theology, and cultural influences; however, the anthropological, sociological, and psychological dimensions and aspects are part of it.

In the subsequent part, I will go over the sociological approach of Émile Durkheim briefly, focusing on its aim, and ultimately, in the section that will follow, I will discuss how this approach can be reframed in understanding not the explanation of religion but its manifestation "as it stands".

Explanatory Approaches to Religion

There are various approaches to the study of religion. The approaches can be divided into two lines: understanding and explanation. Wilhelm Dilthey made the distinction between understanding (*Verstehen*) and explanation

(*Erklären*). Understanding is to understand, involving empathy, interpretation, and meaning, thus close to the humanities, and explanation is to explain, involving causal laws and empirical methods, thus scientific and suitable to sciences (Dilthey, 1989). On the same lines, approaches to the study of religion can be categorized into two: interpretive (understanding) approaches and explanatory approaches. Interpretive (understanding) approaches aim to understand religion *sui generis*, treating religion as it is in its content and meaning. For example, theological, philosophical, phenomenological, hermeneutical, comparative, and literary (textual) approaches belong to this category. These approaches are non-reductive without reducing religion to something else. On the other hand, explanatory approaches seek to explain religion. Sociological, anthropological, psychological, evolutionary, Marxist (Critical), and postcolonial approaches belong to this category. They aim at explaining the origins, causes, and functions of religion. They are reductive: reducing religion to something else, for example, society, psyche, and power, and subjecting religion to their disciplinary methods, which are external to religion and were not and are not to the extent in use by confessional theologians and do not make part of the curriculum at most seminaries and religiously affiliated academic institutions.

Among explanatory approaches to the study of religion, anthropological, sociological, and psychological approaches are classical and established approaches and methods in religious studies. Therefore, in the subsequent section, I will only discuss the sociological approach of Émile Durkheim, focusing on how it is explanatory, and throughout the discussion, I will maintain that this approach has its shortcomings; however, it could be reframed as explaining the manifestation of religion.

Sociological Approach of Émile Durkheim

The sociological approach to religion is primarily focused on explaining religion, i.e., its origins, functions, and its relationship with other social institutions. However, seeking the origins of religion may be viewed as the main idea in the sociology of religion, which makes the sociological concept of religion the idea that religion is a social construction, as the core concept in the discipline. Social construction of religion thus means that religion, in its specific forms, beliefs, practices, and institutions, is not an inherent or naturally occurring phenomenon or is not simply an inherent spiritual truth, but rather a product of human interaction, cultural processes, and historical development. Though sociology of religion could still be pursued without grappling with the question of origins and relying on a substantive concept of religion, as Max Weber did.

The social construction of religion can be effectively understood by examining the insights of Émile Durkheim. While he provided critical insights for the concept's development, its further enriched understanding has been shaped by a wide array of subsequent contributions.

Émile Durkheim could arguably be considered the founding father of the social construction of religion, as he is also the most influential sociologist of religion. While he didn't use the exact phrase "social construction", his entire theory of religion, particularly as laid out in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1912/1995), argues that religion is fundamentally a social creation, an expression of collective life, and a reflection of society itself. He asserts that "Because religious force is none other than the collective an anonymous force of the clan and because that force can only be conceived of in the form of the totem, the totemic emblem is, so to speak, the visible body of the god." (Durkheim, 1995, p. 223). According to Durkheim "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” (Durkheim, 1995, p. 44). His central explanation was that the sacred is a symbol of society itself, and that religious rituals are crucial for generating and reinforcing social solidarity and collective consciousness. He concludes his chapters by saying, “The general conclusion of the chapters to follow is that religion is an eminently social thing. Religious representations are collective representations that express collective realities; rites are ways of acting that are born only in the midst of assembled groups and whose purpose is to evoke, maintain, or recreate certain mental states of those groups” (Durkheim, 1995, p.9). And “...the idea of society is the soul of religion” (Durkheim, 1995, p.421).

Reframing Sociological Approach of Émile Durkheim

In the following part, I would like to make an argument that the social construction of religion is unsubstantiated, considering those world religions with a discernible historical footprint, as their teachings are present in scriptures and historical documents such as Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. In authenticating the teachings of these religions, source verification is a reliable method. However, the development of these religions after the inception and the death of their founders, by which they are supposed to have primarily culminated, society in its multifaced ways has become one of the entangled elements in the cumulative traditions of such religions, which is central to the varied manifestations of these faiths in the present time. This argument could be developed from Durkheim's own thought.

Émile Durkheim's study of religion in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* starts with a methodological premise that by investigating the elementary forms of an indigenous religion, specifically through the ethnographic study of Aboriginal Australian totemism, one could discern the fundamental origins and

universal characteristics of religious phenomena. So, the causes found in such an investigated case of a religion would be the same causes that have made the inception of other religions possible. Durkheim starts his work by stating, “I propose in this book to study the simplest and most primitive religion that is known at present, to discover its principles and attempt an explanation of it” (Durkheim, 1995, p.1). Durkheim’s attempt to understand a religion from a simple form is because he thinks that it is more difficult to understand what could be understood from a simple form than a complex form of developed religions. For Durkheim, therefore, an investigation into the basic structures of religion was deemed more illuminating than an analysis of complex religious systems, as the former facilitated the identification of core features. He argues, “Surely it is not by observing the complex religions that have arisen in the course of history. Each of those religions is formed from such a variety of elements that it is very hard to distinguish what is secondary to them from what is primary, and what is essential from what is accessory” (Durkheim, 1995, P.4). He reinforces his argument by stating that “The case is altogether different in the lower societies. The lesser development of individuality, the smaller scale of the group, and the homogeneity of external circumstances all contribute to reducing the differences and variations to a minimum” (Durkheim, 1995, P.5).

Yet, it is arguable that Durkheim’s conceptualization on this point introduces an inherent difficulty that compromises the validity of his claims. To understand a well-developed, sophisticated, and complex religion, Durkheim’s own view supports otherwise, an option of using the historical method, and he lucidly explains it within the discussion’s context.

Durkheim articulates his view on the historical method by stating that history is the essential method for explaining religion and other human institutions. He argues that modern religions can only be understood by tracing

their gradual formation over time, since history reveals how their components emerge sequentially and under specific social conditions. Therefore, explanation must begin with the simplest and earliest forms of an institution and then show how they progressively develop into their present, complex forms (Durkheim, 1995, P.3).

The above thought of Durkheim on historical method has profound importance, as it posits that comprehending modern religions requires an initial examination of their historical trajectories. History is the sole method for analyzing religions, as it allows us to break them down into their parts and identify the circumstances and causes of their formation. Therefore, explaining any religious belief requires starting from its simplest, most elementary form and following its gradual evolution to its present complexity. The study of early religious forms should primarily derive from the historical trajectories of established faiths, not from speculative analogies drawn from extant elementary forms of indigenous religions far removed from advanced human civility. The initial adherents of religions such as Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam, for instance, were situated within demonstrably organized societies.

Durkheim's above view about historical method eliminates any need to examine and study any present elementary form of indigenous religion that is in a simple form, and to generalize any findings from such research to modern world religions. Because it is possible by historical method to go back to the time of Mahatma Budha, Jesus Christ, and Muhammad (PBUH) to find the causes of Buddhism as Enlightenment that Mahatma Buddha had, revelation that Jesus and Muhammad had and there is from the discourses of Buddha and the scriptures of Christianity and Islam a clear view that these religions were not the representations of collective consciousness or reflections of the society but they were in their teachings novel, revolutionary, not as a social projection, and with an organy within an individual as the founder of the religion. For example, the Anatta doctrine of "no-self" is a hallmark of Buddhist philosophy, which is a

novel concept from Buddhism without any antecedents and similar concepts found about the self in pre-Buddhist religions in India or society. Therefore, such an important concept within Buddhism does not align with or signify a collective consciousness or reflection of society. Moreover, contrary to the theoretical implication that the basis of world religions is in collective consciousness, as that would guarantee widespread acceptance by people in their emerging time and formative period, historical accounts demonstrate that these religions encountered significant disagreement, opposition, and conflict.

Therefore, the explanatory nature of Durkheim's sociological theory, which is broadly a social construction of religion, becomes problematic in terms of generalization, as it does not apply to world religions. The very explanatory nature of Durkheim's theory, predicated on the social construction of religion as a societal projection, is undermined by his own articulated historical method, thereby diminishing its significance and decisive impact.

Durkheim's sociological theory of religion, viewed as a social construction, should be re-conceptualized as explaining the manifestation and evolution of religion through its diverse theological, sectarian, and cultural forms, rather than providing a fundamental explanation of religion itself. Societies significantly shape the manifestation and historical development of religions. This is evident when the same religion encounters different cultural contexts, leading to distinct interpretations and conceptualizations concerning its faith, worldview, and practices. Durkheim himself acknowledges this view, stating, "The beliefs as well as the rites are taken in different ways, depending on men, milieux, and circumstances. Here it is priests, there monks, elsewhere the laity; here, mystics and rationalists, theologians and prophets, and so on" (Durkheim, 1995, p.4). Durkheim then highlights a dilemma: if this holds true, "Under such conditions, it is difficult to perceive what might be common to all... But how can one find

the common basis of religious life under the luxuriant vegetation that grows over it? How can one find the fundamental states characteristic of the religious mentality in general through the clash of theologies, the variations of ritual, the multiplicity of groupings, and the diversity of individuals?” (Durkheim, 1995, p.5). He offers a solution to this problem, stating that “the case is altogether different in the lower societies. The lesser development of individuality, the smaller scale of the group, and the homogeneity of external circumstances all contribute to reducing the differences and variations to a minimum. The group regularly produces an intellectual and moral uniformity of which we find only rare examples in the more advanced societies. Everything is common to everyone” (Durkheim, 1995, P.5). According to him, this pure and simple religious form is beneficial because “Neither the popular nor the priestly imagination has yet had the time or the means to refine and transform the basic material of ideas and religious practices; reduced to essentials, that material spontaneously presents itself to examination, and discovering it calls for only a minimal effort. Inessential, secondary, and luxurious developments have not yet come to hide what is primary” (Durkheim, 1995, P.5).

It’s reasonable to accept Durkheim’s view that early religions evolve with diversity, shaped by various interpretations from theologians and others, particularly as the historical development of religion is often socially constructed. However, a significant problem with Durkheim’s view is that studying elementary forms of indigenous religions today won’t necessarily reveal the origins of major faiths like Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam. Understanding the initial, simpler forms of these complex religions requires deep research and source verification of their own historical texts and early writings. Furthermore, the fundamental conditions, creeds, and core teachings of these religions are, in fact, preserved in their scriptures and early documents. The later theological and intellectual developments are built upon this existing core. Therefore, it’s not as challenging as Durkheim implies to understand that the simple form of these religions is

impossible to know. He seems to indirectly suggest that one could discard a religious tradition's primary and secondary sources and instead rely on an ethnographic study of indigenous society. The foundational flaw in Durkheim's thinking lies in his attempt to find a radical, universal definition of religion that applies across all faiths. Such a definition has proven elusive because while religions share similarities, they are not identical in their totality. Therefore, instead of what Durkheim suggests, the historical method is the tool that can help in discovering the inception of religion by taking into consideration the lives of the founders of religions, their teachings and scripture, and the overall history of their earliest time and the first generation of the adherents in consideration. By following this way, it is possible to reach an understanding of the simple form of any religion in the beginning.

Conclusions

This article argues for a necessary shift in the academic study of religion and reframing the explanatory approaches to religion as discerning the manifestation of religion. Wilfred Cantwell Smith argued that the Western idea of "religion" is a problematic concept. Instead, emphasizing personal faith and accumulated tradition gives us a better way to examine religion. This perspective recognizes that while the core teachings and foundational elements of faiths like Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam are preserved in their scriptures, their lived experiences are deeply influenced by historical, social, and cultural factors.

In my examination of Émile Durkheim's sociological theory of religion, I highlight this tension. Durkheim's work argues for social construction, or in other words, the collective consciousness as the explanation of religion. However, his attempt to apply findings from elementary forms of indigenous religions to explain the origins of complex world religions has its problems. His own focus on historical method leads to the implication that we need to explore the specific

historical paths, foundational teachings, and early followers of each major faith to understand its initial “simple form.” The novel teachings of religions and their earliest reception by people with disagreement, hostilities, and conflicts prove that they were not the products of collective consciousness or a representation of society.

Therefore, instead of searching for a universal, simple explanation of religion, we should revisit explanatory approaches like Durkheim’s sociology. We need to see how societal forces become key to a faith’s cumulative tradition. By examining how anthropological, sociological, and psychological factors have interacted with religious traditions throughout history, we can better understand how religion, as it exists today, is shaped by its followers and their social settings.

Ultimately, this shift benefits both secular scholars and theologians. For secular scholars, it offers a more nuanced way to study the lived reality of religion without forcing a simplistic explanation of its origins. For theologians, it provides a critical perspective on how religious traditions evolve while reminding us not to confuse the study of adherents with the essence of religion itself. The right way to understand the “simple form” of complex religions isn’t through the studies of elementary forms of indigenous religions, but through careful historical research into the unique lives of their founders, their original teachings, and the experiences of their earliest communities. The underlying truth is that while religions may share similarities, their unique essences cannot be summed up in a single, all-encompassing definition.

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