

Theories of religion: emile durkheim and max weber



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The topic I have chosen to discuss is religion, as theorised by Emile Durkheim and Max Weber. Religion can be recognised in every culture around the world. Therefore, sociologists examine it in order to understand why religion and the beliefs and practices associated with religion, are so significant and the position they play within society (Macionis & Plummer, 2008, p610).

Durkheim and Weber both carried out their work around the turn of the 19th century. Both were gripped by the religion and its role in society (Nisbet, 1975). However, the both studied religion from two very different perspectives, although both thought in evolutionary terms (Parsons, 1964, p xxvii). Durkheim holds a collectivist view of society, exploring it from the perspective that religion has a cohesive effect on people through sharing values, symbols and social norms (Macionis and Plummer, 2008, p611).

Weber on the other hand, has a more individualist perspective. He focused on the sociology of religion, such as the relationship between religious ideas and commitments, with other sociological aspects, such as human behaviour in relation to economics (Parsons, 1964, p xx).

Durkheim was born in 1858 in France. His work, centred around social change and industrial society, however, he became focused on social and moral order and how it was achieved and maintained in society. In particular, the transition between traditional society and modern society, and how this influences how social structures and relationships are adapted and maintained (Dillon, 2010 p79). Durkheim was interested in providing a scientific basis for sociology and defining sociology as field of study which he

discusses in “ The Rules of Sociological Method” (Calhoun, et, al., 2007, p 135). During his lifetime, he published extensively. “ The Division of Labour”, where he examined social cohesion within the modern industrialise society. “ Suicide” discussed diminishing social bonds in modern society, and this influences patterns of suicide. “ The Elementary Forms of Religious Life” examines how the social origins and function of religion and beliefs associated with it, and how they are reinforced by rituals and ceremonies (Calhoun, 2007, p136). Durkheim, along with Marx and Weber, is now seen as an extremely significant classical theorist, and has had an influence across many areas, such as education, religion, and health (Calhoun, 2007, p 133).

Durkheim wrote extensively in the area of religion. He recognised that religion was a social concept that needed to be explored in and of itself, as a primitive and simple level. He looked to define religion which he concluded was “ 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, 1976, p47). This definition suggests that religion is collective within society and should be examined in this way. He identified the functions of religion in society. According to Durkheim, religion is a social cohesive. If people share a religion, the shared beliefs values and symbols, they are united by these, therefore it religion as a cohesive among these people. He suggests that as a result of this, religion underlies our moral and emotional links with others. (Macionis & Plummer, 2008, p611).

He claimed that religion does not conflict with science. It is not there to enhance our knowledge, instead it is there in order to provide a guide for the way we act and live (Durkheim, 1976, p416). The primary intention of religion is to influence the moral of life (Durkheim, 1976, p420).

Fundamentally, the task of religion is preserving a normal, positive life (Durkheim, 1976, p29). Durkheim also claims that we organize life into the sacred and the profane, and neither can exist without the other (Durkheim, 1976, p308). The sacred is defined as anything that is extraordinary and instils a sense of reverence and sometimes fear (Macionis & Plummer, 2008, p611).

Another function of religion, according to Durkheim, is that religion provides a sense of purpose, meaning and comfort (Macionis and Plummer, 2008, p612). Durkheim suggests it strengthens a person's moral and feeling of "guardian support". It allows people to rise out of themselves, which then helps mould their action and behaviour, which results in the collective cohesive affect on society. This, he says, is how the social institution of religion works, therefore it is society itself that is the source of the action guided by religion (Durkheim, 1976, p418). He proposes that the dream of an ideal society, an idealistic society that would eliminate evil and sufferings, suggest religion, as this is what religion aims for. This indicates that religion suggests the ideals of society, instead of explaining it (Durkheim, 1976, p420).

Durkheim studied religion from a collectivist perspective. He recognised that society was becoming more individualist, however he believed that this collectivist society still existed but in another form. He believed that the new <https://assignbuster.com/theories-of-religion-emile-durkheim-and-max-weber/>

individualist forms of religion were simply another form of collectivist forms in society (Durkheim, 1976, p425). He claimed that religious beliefs were not the individual, but were common beliefs belonging to a group united by these beliefs (Durkheim, 1976, p43).

Durkheim also studied the social phenomena of religion in relation to how it constrains social behaviour (Dillon, 2010, p118). His view was that the religious symbols and imagery are used by society to encourage conformity, and instil these into cultural norms. Religion is used in order to justify these cultural norms, for example, norms surrounding marriage and reproduction (Macionis & Plummer, 2008, p612).

Max Weber was born in Germany in 1864 to a Protestant family. Despite being trained as a lawyer and historian, he became interested in the social sciences, in particular economics. His research was halted by a period of serious depression, however, most of his prominent work was carried out after his breakdown, such as "The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism" (Calhoun, et al., 2007, p206). Weber was particularly interested in the cultural and non-economic sources related to social action. He investigates the sources of social phenomena from a historical and cultural perspective and how they influenced the practices within social institutions. He was a moderate left supporter of German nationalism, and helped found the German Democratic Party, as well as playing a part in the Treaty of Versailles and the Weimar Constitution, before he died in 1920 (Dillon, 2010, pp117-118).

Like Durkheim, Weber recognised that there is not a known society, that doesn't include something that can be classified as religion (Parson, 1964, p xxvii). Although he also thought in evolutionary terms, he was more engaged by systems of meaning, which can be interpreted (Parsons, 1964, xxvii). He studied the subjective meaning and views of religion, and its cultural and historical origins, as well as how these produce institutional practices (Dillon, 2010, p117). He investigated the religious and cultural beliefs that are at the source of religious and social structures (Dillon, 2010, p119). He believed that these beliefs and values are worthy of investigation as they are what shape social institutions (Dillon, 2010, p125). He believed that religion played a role of stereotyping within society, as it structures and preserves social groups and relationship and provides a social identity for groups. He maintained that religion interacted with other social and cultural aspects (Harrington, 2005, p67). Weber's most prominent work, "The Protestant ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism", discussed the interaction between religion and economic aspects.

Weber introduced the "ideal type" in order to measure and compare social phenomenon. They are used in the quest to explain different social relationship and actions (Dillon, 2010, p126). As regards religion, an ideal type is the distinctive characteristics of a religion. Weber discusses Protestantism in its ideal form, and how the characteristics of this religion affect everyday life (Dillon, 2010, p127). He examines how different religious traditions and their structures influence society, particularly in relation to the economy and capitalism