

Modernity, Sociology, and Religion: Sociology of Religion

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Abstract

This essay provides a brief overview of the history of the sociology of religion. Primarily, we argue that sociology emerged as a "religious" endeavor, demonstrating that the discipline itself was built upon the foundations of modernity–religion debates. We date the emergence of the sociology of religion to the birth of sociology itself. Furthermore, we propose that sociology's effort to construct/define new "religion(s) of humanity" in response to the crisis experienced by modern societies progressed in parallel with sociological analyses of existing religions.

The famous economic historian David Landes summarized the massive transformation caused by the technological progress that began with the invention of the steam engine and reached its peak with the Industrial Revolution with the words, "Englishman of 1750 was closer in material things to Caesar's legionnaires than to his own great-grandchildren" (Giddens 1986:15). However, this unexpected change did not remain confined to the technical and economic realm; it became the precursor of profound, multidimensional transformations in culture, politics, and religion, ultimately resulting in "all that is solid" melting "into air" (Marx and Engels 2002:70). The changing relations of production during this process gave rise to wage labor, while factories—the locomotive of industrial capitalism—laid the groundwork for the emergence of large cities as centers of attraction. In this context, the increasing division of labor and specialization as distinguishing features of modernity, played a significant role in shaping 'new' forms of social cohesion through 'organic solidarity.' Traditional norms such as religion and culture, which were dominant in the functioning of society, began to give way to other, not yet fully matured, 'norms.' However, this process

of transformation was extremely delicate and risky because social cohesion established through organic solidarity could lead to a state of normlessness, or anomie, where individuals feel disconnected from the collective conscience. On an individual psychological basis, as Simmel observed, in large cities, where "the development of modern culture is characterized by the predominance of what one can call the objective spirit over the subjective," the individual became "a single cog as over against the vast overwhelming organization of things" (Simmel 2002:13, 18).

Consequently, the transition from *mechanic solidarity* to *organic solidarity*, described by Hobsbawm as the "tyranny of the clock" and by Weber as the "iron cage of rationality," was accompanied by several other historic shifts: the Protestant Reformation, the formation of the modern state, the rise of capitalism, and various forms of the scientific revolution. As a result of this process, the wall between the 'religious' and 'secular' worlds was dismantled; the hegemony of the religious domain was broken, and one 'secular world' emerged. However, within this secular world, other differentiated systems such as the state and the economy arose (Roberts and Yamane 2021; Casanova 1994). At this point,

people's daily lives were no longer organized by the sounds of the *adhan*, church bells, or the calls of the *hazzan*. Instead, "the fate of our times" came to be "characterized by rationalization and intellectualization and, above all, by the 'disenchantment of the world'" (Weber 1946:155). It is precisely at this juncture that sociology in general, and the sociology of religion in particular, emerged as disciplinary intellectual efforts to make sense of this rupture and reconstruction process. These many radical changes resulted in humanity losing the moral apparatus that it had possessed for millennia. In Durkheim's words, during "a time when society was disturbed by some painful crisis or by beneficent but abrupt transitions, it was momentarily incapable of exercising its moral influence; the scale was upset" (Durkheim [1897] 1951:252).

At this point, sociology, with its primary agenda to identify the 'new scale' of the modern era, emerged with secular references but, paradoxically, with a 'religious' mission. In an era when societies and individuals suffered from a lack of social regulations, sociology became a disciplinary expression of an inquiry into what new 'social glues' could prevent 'chaos' and 'anomie.' However, historically, religion had been such a significant element in shaping the 'collective conscience' that even scholars who believed religion would not be a powerful force in the modern era built their sociological frameworks on religious analogies. Thus, Comte, one of the founding figures of sociology, sought to construct a 'religion of humanity,' while Durkheim described sociology as the 'science of morality' (Durkheim 1964, 1972).

However, the process of constructing or defining new "religion(s) of humanity" developed in parallel with the sociological analysis of existing religions. On one hand, various religion-like factors that could hold societies together in the modern era were being debated, while on the other, religion itself became a subject of sociological analysis. Indeed, in this process, we see that the founding figures turned religion into an object of sociological inquiry (Wuthnow 2003). In this framework, we can assert that Weber and Durkheim, in particular, provided the essential intellectual tools for the social scientific analysis of religion—tools that remain relevant today—and helped delineate the disciplinary boundaries of the field. More importantly, these classical modern scholars introduced a foundational assumption that has been almost universally accepted in the sociology of religion and has been highly influential in the development of the discipline: "modernity is a secularizing force!" (Roberts and Yamane 2021:26). In this context, although some views that religion would entirely disappear quickly lost its validity, various perspectives—particularly those based on Weber and Durkheim's work—on the transformation of religion have generally paved the way for the development of both the sociology of religion and, more specifically, secularization theories.

In conclusion, based on this brief historical narrative, first, it is clear that the emergence of the sociology of religion dates back to the birth of sociology itself. Second, the sociology of religion has developed as an intellectual endeavor encompassing the entirety of theoretical, institutional, and historical debates on how sociology, as a

modern discipline, has "made religion sociological." Thirdly, the sociology of religion has been shaped by the foundational

figures' assumption that "modernity is a secularizing force!" and has thus emerged as a discipline built upon secularization debates.

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