

# Can Religious Studies Be a Social Science?

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## *The Social Science of Religion in Trouble*

IT MAY SEEM surprising, or even odd, to be asking at this date whether religious studies can be a social science or not. The approach and methods of the social sciences seem to have provided foundations too stable to bring into question, and the amount of solid scholarship on religion being produced year after year in the field of sociology and anthropology too great to ignore. What is more, the continued growth of religious fundamentalism and new religious movements seems to clamor for more social science of religion, not less. And if we look back at the emergence of the study of religion to sociological pioneers like Durkheim and Weber, as well as anthropological “giants” from Tylor and Malinowski to Lévi-Strauss, the formidable efforts made in the field seem to render the question suspect from the start.

I do not mean to deny any of this, but at the same time there seem to be certain difficulties lurking in the shadows of these facts. I am not thinking here of the neglect that the study of religion has suffered as a branch of sociology—what the British sociologist James Beckford has called its “insulation and isolation.”<sup>1</sup> The difficulty I have in mind is rather more basic. The very foundations of the social sciences are being shaken today as doubts are being voiced about the very assumptions on which they rest. This is hardly a matter of indifference to the sociology of religion.

Here I shall restrict my comments to sociology and anthropology, which have the most immediate connections to the study of religion. In particular, I will focus on Durkheim, whose decisive contribution to the establishment of these disciplines is uncontested.

<sup>1</sup> James A. Beckford, “The Insulation and Isolation of the Sociology of Religion,” *Sociological Analysis* 46/4 (1985): 347–54.

In his 1895 book, *The Rules of Sociological Method*, Durkheim outlined the methods for the newly emerging science. Proper understanding, he argued, required a clear definition of subject matter and terms; research was to be grounded in a commitment to the facts gathered objectively and free of subjective interference. In short, his aim was to construct sociology by following the lead of the methodology of the natural sciences that had developed so quickly since the eighteenth century. His approach is nowhere better summed up than in the oft-criticized phrase, “social phenomena are things and ought to be treated as things.”<sup>2</sup>

Through his highly praised study on *Suicide* and the appearance in 1898 of the first issue of *L'Année sociologique*, Durkheim brought his methods to practical fruition. Radcliffe-Brown and Parsons fashioned his methods into structural-functionalist models that became the backbone of subsequent anthropology and sociology. Though later to be criticized by the structuralism of Lévi-Strauss, the phenomenologists, and symbolic-interactionism, these paradigms remained dominant for the social sciences and the social-scientific study of religion. They served as the founding model for much of the research on new religious movements, which has employed statistical resources and the like in the attempt to rethink the structures and functions of religious groups. Robert Bellah's theory of civil religion and Peter Berger's theory of the “sacred canopy” simply tried to supplement what was wanting in the Parsons model<sup>3</sup> and to demarcate religion from society.

Since the 1970s, however, this positivistic approach has been rattled at its roots. To begin with, the assumption of an “objective” stance of the researcher was questioned, to be replaced with a general recognition of the deep ties that bind scholars and their work to the social environment, as well as of their own “reflexive” influence on that same environment.<sup>4</sup> In the field of anthropology, too, fieldworkers have lost their status as pure, unblemished observers to be classified as participants in the asymmetry of a colonial or neocolonial relationship, as a presence that wields authority by the very praxis of making observations and writing about them.<sup>5</sup> What is more, as even natural scientists like Ilya Prigogine began to argue against the fiction of observable “facts” free of theoretical and social bias,<sup>6</sup> the social sciences, for which proximity to their subject matter was always greater, became all the more suspect.

<sup>2</sup> Emile Durkheim, *The Rules of Sociological Method* (Toronto: Macmillan, Free Press, 1964), 27.

<sup>3</sup> Robert N. Bellah, *Beyond Belief: Essays on Religion in a Post-Traditional World* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970); Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy* (New York: Doubleday, 1967).

<sup>4</sup> Anthony Giddens, *New Rules of Sociological Method* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1987); Giddens et al., *Reflexive Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994).

<sup>5</sup> J. Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988); see also the Introduction to J. Clifford and G. E. Marcus, *Writing Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986).

<sup>6</sup> Ilya Prigogine, *Order out of Chaos: Man's New Dialogue with Nature* (Boulder: New Science Library, 1984).

Finally, the kind of thinking that spawned vast armies of pigeon-hole researchers, each bent over some small piece of the subject matter broken off from the whole in the hope of acquiring certain knowledge, continues to come under unrelenting attack. Leading sociologists like Giddens, Habermas, Luhmann, and Wallerstein, while continuing to criticize the fragmentation of research and pluralization of methods, aim at constructing a unified theory—an aim which, alas, has yet to produce notable results in the area of religious research. Meantime, in the realm of anthropology, as witnessed in Geertz's critique of Lévi-Strauss,<sup>7</sup> the quest for integration is directed not at offering a general theory but at finding a more effective descriptive method for representing cultures being studied. In this sense, anthropology has cut itself off from other branches of the social sciences, obliging us to classify it among the idiographic sciences (humanities) rather than among the nomothetic ones (social sciences).

This challenge to several of the underlying assumptions of the social sciences in the nineteenth century is not inconsequential for scholars specializing in religion. But what exactly are we to do? For my part, I am inclined to return to the starting point and inquire anew about the very possibility of a social science of religion. To be more precise, I would like to reexamine the work of Durkheim, which was so decisive in the formative years of the social sciences of sociology and anthropology.

### *A Rereading of The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*

What I have in mind in rereading Durkheim is not, as should be clear from my earlier comments, to promote him as a champion of positivism. It has been pointed out that there was an important turning point in the development of Durkheim's thinking. In 1895 he was so impressed by reading W. Robertson Smith's *Lectures on the Religion of the Semites* that he decided to make religion the focus of his study. The upshot, as has been noted,<sup>8</sup> was a shift from a positivism optimistic about the prospects of science and society to a skepticism of a pessimistic stamp. He was an avid supporter of the Third Republic and worked diligently for educational reform and the establishment of the science of sociology, which makes it all the more astonishing to find him remarking: "The old ideals and divinities which incarnate them are dying because they no longer respond sufficiently to the new aspirations of our day; and the new ideals which are necessary to orient our life are not yet born."<sup>9</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Clifford Geertz, "Thick Description," *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973).

<sup>8</sup> Robert N. Bellah, *Emile Durkheim on Morality and Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973), xlvi.

<sup>9</sup> Emile Durkheim, "The Dualism of Human Nature," cited in Bellah, *Emile Durkheim on Morality and Society*, xlvi.

*The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, which he wrote in his final years, grappled with this shift of concern and viewpoint. This sets the work apart from his earlier writings. In contrast with these latter, we find these differences formulated:

study of one's own society → study of other societies  
focus on modern societies → focus on primitive societies  
a critical approach to religion → sympathy with religion  
stress on practices → stress on beliefs

Let us consider these changes more concretely. Durkheim opens this massive work, which runs to over 600 pages, with a definition of religion, remarking that "All known religious beliefs, whether simple or complex, present one common characteristic," namely a classification of things into sacred and profane.<sup>10</sup> After defining rites as "the rules of conduct which prescribe how a man should comport himself in the presence of these sacred objects,"<sup>11</sup> he goes on painstakingly to describe and analyze three principal forms of rite: taboo, sacrifice, and cult (particularly *fête*). Breaking with ethnographic approaches to the Australian Aborigines, he offers his own interpretation. In his concluding chapter we read:

As we have progressed, we have established the fact that the fundamental categories of thought, and consequently of science, are of religious origin. We have seen that the same is true for magic and consequently for the different processes that have issued from it. On the other hand it has long been known that up until a relatively advanced moment of evolution, moral and legal rules have been indistinguishable from ritual prescriptions. In summing up, then, it may be said that nearly all the great social institutions have been born in religion.<sup>12</sup>

Durkheim makes the claim that all social institutions have a religious origin, in order to present the counterclaim that "religious faith has its origin in society."<sup>13</sup>

Vital energies are over-excited, passions more active, sensations stronger; there are even some which are produced only at this moment. A man does not recognize himself; he feels himself transformed and consequently he transforms the environment which surrounds him. In order to account for the very particular impressions which he receives, ... above the real world where his profane life passes he has placed another which, in one sense, does not exist except in thought, but to which he attributes a higher sort of dignity than to the first. Thus, from a double point of view it is an ideal world.

<sup>10</sup> Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1982), 37.

<sup>11</sup> Durkheim, *Elementary Forms*, 41.

<sup>12</sup> Durkheim, *Elementary Forms*, 418–19.

<sup>13</sup> Durkheim, *Elementary Forms*, 431.

The formation of the ideal world is therefore... a natural product of social life. For a society to become conscious of itself and maintain at the necessary degree of intensity the sentiments which it thus attains, it must assemble and concentrate itself.<sup>14</sup>

These passages evoke another, romantic Durkheim, different from the positivist we are more accustomed to. With certain reservations, they clarify the thesis I am proposing here. What they show is that religious beliefs and the sacred represent the self-consciousness of an idealized image that society has of itself, a consciousness that is not revealed in some mystical manner or cooked up by selected individuals in the solitariness of their own minds, but is realized in coming together and performing rituals. It is at this point that the problem arises: What is the relationship between the self-consciousness of an idealized society that is born out of cult and actual society itself? In other words, what kind of functions does this self-consciousness perform so that it can function as society? Durkheim's thesis with its stress on idealization seems to have affinities with Feuerbach's theory of alienation according to which God is an idealized projection of human nature. If we stress the fact that beliefs are shared in common by the members of a society, we seem to land ourselves back in the structural-functionalism of Radcliffe-Brown and Parsons. It seems to me that the very reason Durkheim found this unacceptable was that he was trying to locate a place within the functions of living societies for religion as the generator of a society's self-consciousness.

The ideal society is not outside of the real society; it is part of it.... For a society is not made up merely of the mass of individuals who compose it, the ground which they occupy, the things which they use and the movements which they perform, but above all is the idea which it forms of itself.

A society can neither create itself nor re-create itself without at the same time creating an ideal. This creation is not a work of supererogation for it, by which it would complete itself, being already formed; it is the act by which it is periodically made and remade.<sup>15</sup>

How very different this idea of Durkheim's is from that of his self-proclaimed "correct" interpreters Radcliffe-Brown and Parsons! For them the important thing was the various beliefs and value-systems that religion gave rise to, the conformity that follows from having them shared in common, and the way this contributed to the integration of a society. Given their idea of society as a stable system made up of various parts, religion was restricted to its preassigned function of providing values and integrating the whole, and no analysis was made of the mutual relationships

<sup>14</sup> Durkheim, *Elementary Forms*, 422.

<sup>15</sup> Durkheim, *Elementary Forms*, 422.

between religious beliefs and values on the one hand and social behavior on the other. Accordingly, the possibility of humans reforming their beliefs and values was closed off.<sup>16</sup> Durkheim, in contrast, carried out an exhaustive analysis of the three circuits (taboo, sacrifice, cult) in terms of a contrast between the holy—self-consciousness of society—and the profane—the real world—that enabled him to keep a way open to the reformation of self-consciousness. (In this regard, he suggests a correspondence between worship in Aboriginal societies and the modern French revolution.<sup>17</sup>) At the same time, he saw society's self-consciousness of itself as necessary for the regeneration of society, coming close to the central concept of "reflexivity" in modern sociology.

Of course, Durkheim's thesis cannot be simply equated with the notion of reflexivity, since in his case the self-consciousness of a society is regulated as an idealized self-consciousness. This regulation may limit his thesis, but it does open the way to a fresh reading. Depending on how this rereading is done, it can contribute to a deepening of the social-scientific study of religion.

### *Lévi-Strauss, Jameson, and Melucci*

Durkheim's thesis of religion as the idealized self-consciousness of a society can be brought into proximity with Lévi-Strauss's analysis of myth and of the bodily adornment of the Caduveo tribe. I say this because both of them recognize within religious ideas and myths, as well as various forms of representation in bodily adornment, correct understanding of social reality as well as the attempt to go beyond that reality.

Since the eighteenth century it has been known that the Caduveo tribe in western Brazil draw complex designs on the faces of their women. A variety of motifs, somewhat like playing cards, are drawn in symmetrical and asymmetrical patterns. To answer the question of why they have carried on this practice for so long, Lévi-Strauss argued, it is necessary to relate it to the structure of their society.

The Caduveo society is made up of three castes: leaders, warriors, and slaves. They place high value on honor and prestige, and marrying outside of one's caste is seen as the gravest dishonor. Since "each caste shows the tendency to stay confined to itself, even if it means sacrificing the integration of the society as a whole," the society "is in constant danger of coming apart."<sup>18</sup> They protect this tri-

<sup>16</sup> A. R. Radcliffe-Brown, *Structure and Function in Primitive Society* (Cohen and West, 1952); Talcott Parsons, *The Social System* (Glencoe: The Free Press, 1951). Parsons argues, however, that values influence social behavior. At the same time, he does not finally go into questions such as how values are formed or how they change, or how religious values differ from other values.

<sup>17</sup> Durkheim, *Elementary Forms*, 214.

<sup>18</sup> Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes tropiques* (Paris: Plon, 1955), 222.

partite structure from its tendency to disintegration not by looking for real ways to integrate the group but by depicting an imagined integration of the society on the bodies of the women. Their adornments, though asymmetrical, give predominance to “the concern with preserving a balance.” Lévi-Strauss argues that this is their way of insuring that what cannot be realized in actuality is preserved as an “illusion of a society on a relentless and impassioned search for ways to represent its institutions symbolically.”<sup>19</sup>

This way of reading symbols as a way of resolving social contradictions in imagination (repeated in the myth of Oedipus) is based on the idea of a “slated” structure that surfaces in the repetition of the myth:

And since the purpose of myth is to provide a logical model capable of overcoming a contradiction (an impossible achievement if, as it happens, the contradiction is real), a theoretically infinite number of slates will be generated, each one slightly different from the others. Thus, myth grows spiral-wise until the intellectual impulse which has produced it is exhausted.<sup>20</sup>

Herein lies the foundation of Lévi-Strauss’s understanding of religion.

I do not wish to cast doubts on the idea, but all the same it leaves me with a mild discomfort. While Lévi-Strauss takes the power of myth seriously, he does not take seriously enough the power of the human beings who make the myths. The point is not incidental to his approach. Since for him “myth has no author,” his concern is “not how human beings think within myth, but to show the way in which myth thinks within human beings and indeed without their knowing it.”<sup>21</sup> But by abstracting from the praxis of the human individuals who live in the world of reality and create myths, he leaves us without a clue how to consider the relationship between myth and reality. If myth is locked up in its own peculiar category, we seem to be driven away from Durkheim’s understanding of symbol as indispensable for the birth and rebirth of society.

Insofar as Lévi-Strauss’s analysis of myth abstracts from the relationship to reality, he restricts himself to only one aspect of what Jameson, following Kenneth Burke, calls symbolic act. For Burke, there are two aspects to symbolic act. The first is that of *symbolic act*, which aims at a resolution exclusively on the level of the imagination rather than through direct contact with reality. The second is that of *symbolic act*, which seeks to work in reality through the creation of meaningful forms.<sup>22</sup> From this standpoint, Jameson broadens his analysis of symbolic act out

<sup>19</sup> Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes tropiques*, 254.

<sup>20</sup> Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology* (Harmondsworth: Penguin), 229.

<sup>21</sup> Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Le cru et le cuit* (Paris: Plon, 1958), 20, 26.

<sup>22</sup> Frederick Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (London: Methuen, 1981), 76–82.

from his own specialization, the novel, to painting, science, ethical thought, architecture, and advertising. He argues that all these forms of practice can be analyzed within the same interpretative framework. Still, since like Lévi-Strauss, he sees all symbolic act as a way to resolve real contradiction at the level of the imaginary—or in other words, “the objectification of the ideological by the work of aesthetic production”—the aim of interpretation is “the explosion of the seemingly unified text into a host of clashing and contradictory elements.”<sup>23</sup>

There is no denying the fact that Jameson has expanded the object of his analysis admirably, nor that he has shown how one and the same interpretative framework can be applied to a variety of different symbolic practices. But if I have a certain uneasiness with the project, it is the fact that he weighs the symbolizing greater than the acting. To give one example, he tells us that Weber’s *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* can now be read as “a contribution to the study of the bourgeois revolution,” but ultimately needs to be judged a “mirage” or “kind of ideological fable designed to transform into a matter of individual existence what is in reality a relationship between collective systems and social forms.”<sup>24</sup> Given Jameson’s Marxist leanings, the conclusion is perhaps inevitable. But those of us who specialize in religion can only part company with him at this point. The problematic of what role the appearance of Protestantism as a new symbolic form played in the reconstruction of society remains an important one.

### *Research from Here On In*

When we think of what possibilities lie ahead for a standpoint that views religious praxis as an imaginative or symbolic resolution of contradictions, a number of different tasks come to mind.

1. *To clarify the specific traits of individual symbolic practices.* If we are to think of religion as forms of symbolic act, we need to divide them up into categories—myths, rituals, religious movements—and then try to clarify the specific traits of each category. Myth, whose distinctive element is language, may be taken here as an imaginative resolution of real or epistemic contradictions, as Lévi-Strauss has argued. As for what sets myth off as a category from other forms of linguistic praxis, there is a vast sea of literature beginning with the work of Northrop Frye. Ritual, as the work of Victor Turner has made clear, is composed of symbols that “possess two clearly distinguishable poles”: ideological sensory.<sup>25</sup> It may therefore be interpreted as an attempt to resolve a fundamental contradiction of human

<sup>23</sup> Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*, 56.

<sup>24</sup> Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*, 252.

<sup>25</sup> Victor Turner, *The Forest of Symbols* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1970).



existence wherein the discontinuity of language is rooted in the continuity of the body.<sup>26</sup> The constitutive element of religious movements is action which is at the same time a constitutive element of social organization. In this way, religious movements may be interpreted as an attempt to reconcile the contradiction between the ideal society and the actual society. Furthermore, religious movements should not be seen as isolated phenomena but need to be compared to other social movements in order to clarify their defining characteristics. Here the theory of “new social movements” put forward by Melucci is helpful.<sup>27</sup>

2. *To specify the kinds of contradictions entailed by particular religious practices.* Along this same line, rather than follow Durkheim in seeing the cultic practices of the Australian Aborigines as forming a self-consciousness of an idealized society, it would seem more correct to interpret them as a symbolic resolution of fundamental contradictions built into society. In societies marked by higher levels of technological diffusion and environmental construction, the contradiction may be seen to consist in the aim for a more general integration between marriage practices on the one hand and the development of society on the other. On this reading, the sacred may be seen as an imaginative reconciliation of the profane principles of diffusion and integration, which in turn requires a break from the view that the sacred and the profane represent opposing phases of social life and opposing modalities of human existence.

This approach seems particularly effective for the analysis of religious movements. For example, the reasons for the rapid advances of the Sōka Gakkai and the Risshō Kōseikai in postwar Japan may be sought in the way their humanistic doctrine and tight organizational theory drew on the community experience of the past to reconcile the fundamental contradiction experienced by people in the relocation from farming villages to the cities. Or again, the development in recent years of the Aum Shinrikyō may be thought of as a utopian effort aimed at recovering control over body and self from the fragmented and organizational conditions of modern society. The violent character of this movement need not be seen as the preordained course the sect was bound to take in order to be understood as a reflection of the fact that their concerns were too locked up in self and body to allow for any more than the most infantile form of social awareness.

3. *To give thought to the role that the appearance of symbolic patterns in the form of religion plays in the reconstruction of society.* On this point Weber’s interpretation of the emergence of Protestantism as a new symbolic form that prompted the emergence of capitalism remains an important contribution. Similarly, the development of new religions in Japan since the Meiji period may be understood both

<sup>26</sup> Takezawa Shōichirō, *Symbole et pouvoir: Le système général des rites* (Thesis, EHESS, 1985).

<sup>27</sup> Albert Melucci, *Nomads of the Present* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989).

as an imaginative attempt to resolve social contradictions and as a precondition of the emergence of a non-European industrial society in Japan resulting from an obstruction of the infiltration of Christianity into Japan.

4. *Locating religious studies as a clue to understanding society.* If all sorts of religious practices are to be seen as symbolic attempts to resolve social contradictions, it will also be possible to follow this analysis in order further to clarify the deep structures and coding of society. This overlaps with the efforts of Melucci and others to identify the dominant coding of modern societies. In addition, by tracing the transformations of symbolic religious forms, it may be possible to understand what Jameson calls “the ultimate horizon of human history as a whole.”<sup>28</sup> This may in fact be the final goal of all research in the social sciences, but the number of difficult hurdles that have to be overcome along the way is daunting to say the least.

*[translated by J. W. Heisig]*

<sup>28</sup> Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*, 76.