

The Sociology of Religion: A Comparison of the Thinking of Emile Durkheim and Max Weber in Understanding the Role of Religion in Modern Society

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Keywords:

max weber, emile durkheim,
sociology of religion, modern
society, role of religion

ABSTRACT

The background of this research focuses on the importance of understanding the role of religion in modern society, particularly through the thoughts of two major figures in the sociology of religion, Max Weber and Émile Durkheim. Although both agree that religion influences social structures, their views on its role differ significantly. The purpose of this study is to compare the thoughts of Max Weber and Émile Durkheim regarding the role of religion in modern society. The methodology used in this study is a qualitative approach with literature analysis, in which data are collected through the examination of works related to the theories of Weber and Durkheim, as well as relevant previous studies. The results show that Weber emphasized the role of religion in the formation of capitalism, while Durkheim focused on its role in creating social solidarity. Although they approach the issue in different ways, both agree that religion has a significant influence on the formation and organization of society. This research contributes to enriching the study of the sociology of religion by offering a new perspective for understanding the dynamics of religion in an increasingly complex and pluralistic modern society



INTRODUCTION

Religion has become a very influential element in human life, influencing various social, cultural, and political aspects in society. In an ever-changing society, religion plays an important role in shaping life views and social habits, both at the individual and group levels. Although social and cultural developments often occur over time, religion remains an inseparable foundation in social life (Rizqi 2023). In the modern era, religion remains relevant as a factor that influences social behavior and the structure of society as a whole.

The thought of the sociology of religion aims to understand the relationship between religion and society and its impact on social life. Sociologists of religion seek to analyze how religious teachings, rituals, and religious institutions can influence social norms and relationships between individuals in a community. In particular, the sociology of religion focuses on how religion can shape social structures and direct social interactions, both at the individual and group levels (Prüfer 2024). Therefore, the

sociology of religion has an important role in providing insight into the dynamics of people's lives influenced by religious factors.

Emile Durkheim (1858-1917) was a French sociologist who is known as one of the founders of contemporary sociology. Durkheim was born on April 15, 1858 in Epinal, France and came from a religious Jewish family. He studied the usual superior in Paris at the Ecole, where he became interested in philosophy and sociology. Durkheim went on to teach at various universities and became a professor at the University of Bordeaux, playing an important role in the construction and development of sociology as another scientific discipline of psychology and philosophy (Treviño 2019).

Durkheim is famous for his important concepts in sociology, particularly in terms of social structure and social cohesion. In his most famous work, *The Division of Labor in Society* (1893), Durkheim presented the theory of social solidarity, the relationship that unites the individuals of society. It distinguishes between the mechanical solidarity in traditional societies where there is a small division of labor and the organic solidarity that exists in modern society with the more complex and dependent sectors of labor (Hill, Bell, and Laredo 2024).

Furthermore, Durkheim wrote extensively on education, morality and religion. In his book *Suicide* (1897), he analyzed the phenomenon of suicide from a sociological perspective by examining the social factors that influence suicide rates. Durkheim argued that suicide is influenced not only by individual factors, but also by social circumstances and societal pressures (Nahdiyah 2022). This became one of Durkheim's major contributions to understanding the sociology of the relationship between individuals and society.

Durkheim also developed theories about religion in his work. *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1912) views religion as a social phenomenon that strengthens community solidarity. Durkheim died in Paris on November 15, 1917. Although he died at a relatively young age, Durkheim's heirs survived and were hugely influential in sociology, anthropology, and other social sciences to this day (Sinha 2017).

Max Weber (1864-1920) is considered a German sociologist, philosopher, and economist, and one of the founders of contemporary sociology. Weber was born in Erfurt on April 21, 1864, and grew up in an intellectual family with a politician and his religious mother. Despite his comprehensive academic background, Weber first studied law at the University of Heidelberg (Lohmann 2019), then studied the fields of economics, history, and sociology. He is known for his approach that combines social analysis with historical and philosophical interpretations.

Weber is widely known for his sociological theories that focus on the relationships between individuals, societies and institutions. One of Weber's most important concepts is *Understanding*. It is an approach to understanding social behavior by looking at the perspective of the topics involved. Weber also developed a theory of "rationalization." It describes the process by which social, economic and political life is increasingly dominated by the logic of efficiency and rational calculation, reducing the role of traditional and emotional values (Etzrodt 2024). 444 Weber's most famous works are *The*

Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism (1905), combining Protestant ethics with the rise of modern capitalism in Western Europe. Weber argues that Protestant beliefs, particularly in the Calvinist tradition, influenced attitudes toward work, economic success and efficiency that ultimately supported the development of capitalism. This work continues to be an important indication of the changing views of many people about the relationship between religion and economic development and the study of economic sociology (Gokcekuyu 2023).

Furthermore, Weber contributed greatly to the research of bureaucracies and assisted them by distinguishing between traditional, charismatic and legal rules. He also sees social structures as the result of interactions between different groups that compete and fight together for power and resources. Weber died of an illness he suffered in Munich on June 14, 1920, but his legacy still has a profound impact on many social spheres (Hankel 2009).

Max Weber and Emile Durkheim, two major figures in the sociology of religion, offer different but complementary views on the role of religion in society. Max Weber, with his Protestant ethical theory, argued that religion has a great influence in shaping the social and economic character of a society, including in the formation of capitalism (Manna 2024). In contrast, Emile Durkheim focuses more on the role of religion in strengthening social solidarity and attachment between individuals in society (Munawar and Raza 2023). Although these two thinkers have different approaches, they both agree that religion serves not only as a means of belief, but also as a shaping of social structures.

Their thinking provides deep insights into how religion can be a driving or inhibiting factor for social development. Weber saw religion as a force influencing economic and social patterns (Ćeranić, Šarović, and Krivokapić 2023), while Durkheim emphasized the importance of religion in maintaining social order through religious rituals and symbols (Cornélio et al. 2024). Despite their differences in views, both agree that religion plays a central role in shaping society and wider social life.

This article aims to compare the thoughts of Max Weber and Emile Durkheim regarding the role of religion in modern society. By understanding these two views, we can better understand how religion functions not only as a tool to achieve spiritual peace, but also as a force that shapes and influences social structures. This understanding is essential for analyzing the impact of religion in the more complex social developments of the modern era.

Although religion is recognized as an important element in the formation of society, understanding of the role of religion in modern society is still limited. Many studies deal with religion, but often focus on the individual dimension or religious rituals without examining their impact on broader social structures. In the context of contemporary society, the role of religion in influencing social interaction and social change has not been studied in depth. This creates a gap in understanding how religion can play a role in the dynamics of social life in the modern era.

METHODS

This study uses a qualitative approach with a comparative descriptive design to explore and compare the thoughts of Max Weber and Emile Durkheim on religion and its role in modern society. This approach was chosen in order to explore in depth the views of the two sociologists of religion, as well as compare the relevance of their thinking in the face of evolving social dynamics. With a qualitative approach, this research provides the freedom to dive into the meanings, theories, and concepts put forward by Weber and Durkheim, without being bound by statistical limitations or quantitative approaches.

The subject of this research includes the writings and thoughts produced by Max Weber and Emile Durkheim, as well as various previous studies that discuss their contributions in the field of sociology of religion. The study did not involve a specific population or sample of individuals or groups, as the main focus was on the analysis of documents and literature. The data collected is in the form of books, articles, journals, and other references relevant to the thought of Weber and Durkheim. Data collection was carried out through literature studies to explore their theories about religion and society.

The data analysis process is carried out using the content analysis method, where the researcher will compare the ideas and views put forward by Weber and Durkheim regarding the role of religion in modern society. The collected data will be systematically analyzed to identify differences and similarities in their thinking. In this analysis, this study relies on a critical interpretation of existing theories, and relates them to contemporary social phenomena. The results of the analysis are expected to provide a deeper insight into how these two figures view religion and its role in the social structure that continues to evolve in modern society.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of this literature study show that there are significant differences in the views of Max Weber and Emile Durkheim on the role of religion in modern society. Max Weber argues that religion, particularly Protestant ethics, played a crucial role in the development of capitalism in Western Europe. According to Weber, the moral values of the Protestant religion—such as the ethics of hard work and material achievement—were the basis for the growth of the capitalist economy (Fazio, Reggiani, and Santori 2024). Thus, religion functions as a driver of social and economic change that affects people's way of life, especially in economic aspects and work ethics.

This view is in line with Weber's theory of "rationalization," which links religion to social change. Weber asserts that Protestant ethics create conditions that favor the development of capitalism, with individuals oriented toward material achievement and personal success. Religion provides a moral impetus that reinforces the values of capitalism, which in turn changes the social and economic structure of society. These findings reinforce Weber's view that religion functions not only as a spiritual tool, but also as a force that transforms society.

On the other hand, Emile Durkheim emphasized the function of religion in creating social solidarity and attachment between individuals in society. Durkheim argued that

religion plays an important role in maintaining social order through rituals and religious symbols that unite individuals in a community. In Durkheim's view, religion serves as a social glue that facilitates relationships between individuals and groups (Rizqi 2023). Therefore, religion according to Durkheim is not only related to the spiritual dimension of the individual, but also serves as a tool to build social cohesion.

In the context of modern society, Durkheim argues that religion helps create a sense of community through collective rituals that reinforce a shared identity. Although the world is becoming more secular and complex, Durkheim still believes that religion has an important role to play in maintaining social structure and solidarity in society (Herzog 2023). This view shows that religion focuses more on its social role in maintaining social order and stability, not solely as a means of individual or economic achievement.

Although Weber and Durkheim had different approaches to the role of religion, they both agreed that religion influences the social structure and life of society. These findings are in line with previous research showing that religion, in its various forms, influences social behavior and group dynamics. For example, sociologist Peter Berger also states that religion influences the way people interact in society, although he considers the role of religion to be more limited in modern society (Silveira 2022).

However, these findings also point to a gap in the study of religion in the contemporary era, where the development of globalization and religious pluralism often leads to changes in the function of religion in social life. The study reveals that although Durkheim emphasized the importance of religion in maintaining social solidarity, in many modern societies, the role of religion is increasingly complex. Social phenomena such as increasing religious pluralism and secularization also affect social relations and the influence of religion in public life.

In addition, although Weber emphasized the importance of religion in the formation of capitalism, this study found that the relationship between religion and economics in modern society is more complex than Weber describes. Economic globalization and shifting social values have created a new dynamic in which religion is not always the main factor in economic and social change (Ahmed 2024). In this context, although Weber's thinking provides important insights, these findings suggest that we need to dig deeper into how religion functions in an increasingly diverse and globally connected social context.

The study also reveals that although Weber and Durkheim made major contributions to the sociology of religion, the role of religion in modern society needs to be seen in a broader and more dynamic context. Previous studies have shown that although religion has the power to influence individuals and groups, globalization and modernization have created significant changes that affect the relevance of religion in social structures. In this case, religion is not only a factor in social and economic development, but also plays a role in shaping increasingly pluralistic identities and relationships between groups.

On the other hand, although these findings suggest that religion still has an important role, both in social and economic contexts, there are major challenges in

understanding the influence of religion in an increasingly global and pluralistic society (Cipriani and Ricucci 2023). This research underscores the importance of continuing to develop sociological theories of religion that can explain the complexity of the relationship between religion and modern society. Therefore, the results of this analysis make a significant contribution to understanding the dynamics of religion in a changing society, as well as showing the need for a more flexible approach in viewing the role of religion in this modern era.

This research also invites further discussion on the relevance of Weber and Durkheim's views in an increasingly plural and multicultural contemporary social context. Although both figures provide valuable insights, the influence of religion in social life must now be considered more carefully, looking at various external factors such as globalization and secularization. These findings not only enrich our understanding of the role of religion in society, but also open up space for the development of sociological theories of religion that are more in line with existing social realities.

Overall, although the thinking of Weber and Durkheim remains relevant in providing insight into the role of religion in society, this study suggests that religion no longer functions statically but must be understood in an ever-changing social context. A comparison of the thoughts of these two figures helps us see how religion continues to play a role in shaping the social structure and life of society, albeit in a more complex and varied form.

CONCLUSION

The conclusion of this study reveals that the thoughts of Max Weber and Emile Durkheim provide valuable insights into the role of religion in modern society, despite their differing approaches. While both thinkers agree on the importance of religion in shaping social structures, their emphases diverge significantly. Max Weber viewed religion as a driver of social change, particularly in an economic context, arguing that Protestant ethics contributed to the development of capitalism. On the other hand, Emile Durkheim emphasized religion's function in maintaining social solidarity and cohesion through collective rituals that reinforce social bonds. Thus, despite their fundamental differences, both recognize the significant role of religion in the formation and regulation of society.

This research offers a key contribution by providing a new perspective for understanding the dynamics of religion in modern society through a comparative analysis of Weber and Durkheim's ideas. The findings enrich the study of the sociology of religion by demonstrating that, although religion has undergone transformations in form and function, it remains a factor that shapes social structures and influences interpersonal relationships. Within the context of globalization and religious pluralism—which are reshaping the function of religion in social life—this study underscores the importance of developing sociological theories of religion that are more aligned with contemporary social realities. As such, this research can assist scholars, academics, and practitioners in

better understanding the role of religion in an increasingly complex and diverse modern society.

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