



The Future of Religion and Secularity in Sociology's History

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Accepted: 12 July 2021 / Published online: 24 July 2021

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Abstract

Despite being foundational for the origins of modern sociology, religion as a topic of inquiry and the sociology of religion as a subdiscipline have long remained relatively marginalized in the sociological field. Losing sight of sociology's profound initial engagement with religion, or a one-sided understanding of it as indifferent or unsympathetic towards the subject, may have contributed to this phenomenon. This article revisits early sociologists' and the larger family of social philosophers' involvement with religion to offer a more nuanced history. It argues that the religious question was crucial for the development of sociological thinking in three interrelated dimensions: epistemological, normative, and empirical. Epistemologically, social theorists questioned whether the scientific study of society was reconcilable with the premises of faith. Normatively, they were directly or indirectly involved with the question of whether religion should continue to exist and in what forms. Empirically, the main interest was how religion was changing via modernization, or whether it would survive it, which prompted methodological innovations and became the core of the secularization debate. Focusing on key social thinkers from the Enlightenment to the classics of the long nineteenth century, the article discusses the significance of the engagement with religion and secularity for the consolidation of sociology in these three dimensions, as well as its ongoing relevance for the discipline's future.

Keywords Sociology · Religion · History · Secularization

“The beginnings of the sociology of religion are barely distinguishable from the beginnings of sociology per se. This is hardly surprising, given that its earliest

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practitioners ... were committed to the serious study of religion as a crucial variable in the understanding of human societies”

(Davie, 2003, p. 61)

“The birth of sociology as a science has been strongly linked to a questioning of the future of religion in Western societies. The first sociologists could not, in seeking to account for the emergence of modern society, fail to encounter the religious phenomenon”

(Willaime, 2017, p. 7)

Introduction

In 2013, a twelve-member working group featuring some of the leading sociologists of religion in the United States published a report on the status of religion in American sociology. The report made a rather somber diagnosis: “American sociology has not taken and does not take religion as seriously as it needs to ... [It] neglects religion or treats religion reductionistically” (Smith et al., 2013, p. 903). In twenty-three theses, the authors explored the reasons for what they viewed as the relative isolation of religion as a research topic, and the sociology of religion as a subdiscipline, and provided suggestions to advance the dialogue with the larger sociological field. Among the proposals for the future, the report urged going back in time for “*self-reflexively historicizing the study of religion and sociological theory itself*,” which, it held, would help sociologists “see the discipline’s real points of connection to moral, historical, philosophical, and ontological questions” (Smith et al., 2013, p. 919). Inquiring into the ways sociology has approached the religious question, in other words, could engender a better understanding of the discipline itself.

This article responds to this call by providing a systematized overview of early sociology’s multilayered rapport with religion, and its various perceptions of religion’s future. It argues that the religious question was germane for the development of sociology as a discipline in three distinct yet closely interrelated dimensions: epistemological, normative, and empirical. In examining these three dimensions, the purpose is to present a more complex picture of religion in sociology’s history than is often assumed. Indeed, a part of the reason why religion is somewhat marginalized in sociology could be the overlooking of its integral role for the birth of the discipline, or a rather one-dimensional conception of early sociology as mainly indifferent or unfavorable towards the topic.¹ Importantly, the long treatment of religion as a fleeting phenomenon—ironically, by the sociology of religion itself—did not help advance religion’s profile in the social sciences. During much of the twentieth century, secularization theory “overshadowed a lot of social scientific thinking about religion,” which “tended to undermine the taking too seriously of religious institutions, cultures and movements” (Smith, 2008, p. 1561). The problem has also been reflected in the

¹ The literature on the isolation of the sociology of religion within the larger discipline, especially in the United States, cites a combination of historical, conceptual, methodological, and institutional factors. A detailed discussion of these factors is beyond the scope of this article (see, for instance, Beckford, 1985; Calhoun, 1999; Ebaugh, 2002; Smith et al., 2013).

teaching of sociology. Published in *The American Sociologist*, for instance, a content analysis of sociology textbooks in the early 2000s revealed that oversimplified arguments about religious decline continue to dominate the field, which, according to the authors, is caused by “a general lack of familiarity with the topic” among non-specialists (Featherstone & Sorrell, 2007, p. 92).

Revisiting a selection of early sociologists’ and the larger family of social philosophers’ works on religion, this article offers to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of religion in—and its significance for the making of—sociological thought. Although the topic of religion in the history of sociological thought has been investigated in great detail (for a comprehensive analysis, see Cipriani, 2015), it has not been approached from a perspective that systematically considers religion’s constitutive role for sociology, which this article seeks to address. Undertaking a structured review is all the more relevant at a time when the increasing prominence of religion in social and political affairs around the world has been widely recognized in the literature (Casanova, 1994; Toft et al., 2011). Parallel with the “going public” of religions since at least the 1980s, the sociological inquiry of religion has also been experiencing a renaissance in the twenty-first century, featuring “a kaleidoscope of approaches that testify to vitality and liveliness that are more pronounced than ever, and which presage further progress in scientific knowledge applied to religions” (Cipriani, 2021, p. 5). In this context, a deeper appreciation of religion’s place in the discipline’s past could be valuable for informing future perspectives. As such, the historical survey will illustrate that sociology’s early examination of religion went far beyond value-laden judgments and vague predictions about its future demise. While such perspectives do exist, reflection on religious phenomena was variegated, and it had a profound impact on the epistemological, normative, and empirical maturing of the sociological craft.

In what follows, I trace the progression and interaction of these three dimensions in historical sequence. The first section summarizes the legacy of the Enlightenment, where lies the systematic framing of religion in demarcation from the scientific method. Yet rather than being simply antireligious, the critique of religious epistemology was simultaneously counterbalanced by an emphasis on the social utility of religion as the backbone of morality and order. The subsequent section exemplifies the evolution of this bifurcated perspective on religion in the works of Henri de Saint-Simon, August Comte, and Ludwig Feuerbach, who have envisioned distinctly secular yet religiously inspired notions of salvation for society’s future. The third section deals at length with the notion of religion, as well as the prospect of secularization, in the oeuvres of Karl Marx, Émile Durkheim, and Max Weber. The discussion section expands on the foundational implications of this intellectual engagement with religion for the consolidation of sociology, with attention to how these European thinkers impacted the sociological outlook on religion in the United States. The concluding section, finally, highlights the ongoing relevance of religion for the contemporary sociological field and its future.

The Enlightenment’s Divided Legacy

Although the credit is often attributed to the French philosopher Auguste Comte, the term “sociology” was in fact first coined by his compatriot Emmanuel-Joseph Sieyès

some fifty years before him. Author of the famed “What is the Third Estate,” a widely circulated pamphlet in the heat of the French Revolution, Sieyès made an insufficiently defined yet significant note on *sociologie* in an unpublished manuscript of 1780, by which he understood the scientific study of customs, institutions, and public order (Guilhaumou, 2006). Sieyès’ neologism may indeed be too imprecise to dethrone Comte as the originator of modern sociology, yet the worldview expressed in his other works was in many ways representative of the dominant thinking in the nascent discipline—especially its relationship with religion. Despite his training as a priest (he is more commonly known as *Abbé* Sieyès), Sieyès was skeptical of religion’s significance for the methodical study of society. As a young man, he wrote: “man, having arrived on earth, observes to ... begin forming the science of causes. Religion impedes his investigation by raising those causes into the sky” (cited in Guilhaumou, 1997, p. 258).

Like Sieyès, as early sociologists and the larger family of social philosophers of the long nineteenth century sought to make sense of the dazzling social transformations that characterized their epoch—industrialization, urbanization, and bureaucratization, among others—they had no choice but to engage with the religious question in multifaceted ways. Indeed, it would not be an exaggeration to claim that “the sociology of religion is one of the oldest branches of the discipline of sociology. In fact, there is good reason for arguing that it is the oldest” (Anderson et al., 2010, p. 179). To elucidate more systematically the influence of religious inquiry on the rise of the sociological field, I put forward that early sociology’s involvement with religion can be captured in three interrelated dimensions: epistemological, normative, and empirical. Epistemologically, the main question was whether the scientific study of society was compatible with the theological ways of knowing. As embodied in Sieyès’ words above, for most social thinkers since the Enlightenment, religious epistemology was at best irrelevant, if not impairing. Normatively, early social thinkers often touched upon, directly or indirectly, the matter of whether religion *should* have a place in modern society’s future. The record here is more divided: While most were convinced of religion’s immateriality for science, many feared that morality and social order could crumble if religion disappeared. This is why, one should find “a way of doing away with religion without harming the practice of morality,” Sièyes wrote in a later manuscript (cited in Guilhaumou, 1997, p. 258). At the empirical level, finally, sociologists were occupied with religion as a research topic. They sought to make sense of the intricate process of religious change in the age of modernization and wondered whether religion was on the path to an inevitable demise. Such empirical questions not only constituted the origins of the ongoing secularization debate in the sociology of religion, but they also gave birth to a wide range of methodological innovations pertinent for the discipline in general.

Since at least the Scientific Revolution of the seventeenth century, religion’s relevance for producing knowledge on the natural and the social world was meticulously contested. The prevailing empiricist and rationalist philosophers began displacing God from the center of epistemological considerations: The chief source and verification of knowledge for empiricists like John Locke and David Hume was sensory experience, while for rationalists like René Descartes and Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, it was reason. As Immanuel Kant synthesized the two schools of thought in his *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781), he questioned the knowability of God’s existence,

because “the same arguments that demonstrated the inability ... to affirm the existence of a Supreme Being, must be alike insufficient to prove the invalidity of its denial” (Kant, 1781, p. 393). Kant relegated theology to an extraneous status for science, as it fell outside the spatial, temporal, and causal order of things charted in his philosophical system. Religion thus became a matter of subjective experience rather than a phenomenon whose truth can be confirmed or disproved. Regardless of the individual religiosity of the philosophers concerned—many of them were indeed devout believers—, the general tendency in this period was the gradual separation of religion from the theory of knowledge. The epistemological encounter with religion, to a large extent, preceded normative or empirical considerations that were to follow.

One of the first non-theological approaches to study religion as a research topic can be found in the writings of Hume. As an empiricist, Hume set out to explain the origins and functions of religion solely based on observable phenomena. God, miracles, revelation, and the immortality of the soul did not pass his test. Similar to Kant, he approached religion mainly as a subjective phenomenon embedded in human emotions and experience. In his *The Natural History of Religion* (1757), Hume discussed non-monotheistic religions—a path that Durkheim and Weber would follow a century-and-a-half later—to write that “the first ideas of religion arose” not from divinity, but “the ordinary affections of human life; the anxious concern for happiness, the dread of future misery, the terror of death” (Hume, 1757/1889, pp. 18–19). Hume’s secular take on religion may have put him at odds with the Church of Scotland, but it also placed him among those who sowed the seeds of what would come to be known as “methodological atheism” (Berger, 1967) in the sociology of religion, which posits studying religions solely as a human phenomenon without weighing in on the nature of their ultimate truth.

For many eighteenth-century *philosophes*, however, the methodological distancing from religion verged not on atheism, as it is commonly assumed, but rather on deism. The rising popularity of a natural conception of religion among French, English, and American intellectuals can be seen as a compromise between traditional religion and rational ways of knowing (Byrne, 1989). Deists like Voltaire and Thomas Paine justified God’s existence not by revelation, but with the application of reason and observation to the natural world. While accepting the presence of a Supreme Being, deists denied the possibility of divine intervention to natural laws, and vehemently critiqued the dominance and bigotry of religious institutions. In his *The Age of Reason* (1807/1974, p. 50), Paine wrote that he believed in God the creator, but added that religion had to be kept away from politics, because “all national institutions of churches, whether Jewish, Christian or Turkish [Muslim], appear to me no other than human inventions, set up to terrify and enslave mankind.” For figures like Locke, Baruch de Spinoza, and Pierre Bayle, the post-Reformation bloodshed in the European wars of religion² was clear confirmation that states, rather than seeking to exercise religious monopoly, should uphold tolerance and freedom of conscience as a natural right. Denis Diderot (1774/1992, p. 83), the chief editor of the famed *Encyclopédie*, wrote unambiguously that “the distance between the throne and the altar can never be too great,” which was echoed in Thomas Jefferson’s notion of “wall of separation between church and state” embodied in the First Amendment to the US constitution.

² For a critique of the “wars of religion” narrative as a secular construction, see Cavanaugh (2009).

There was, however, one problem. Given that traditional religion could no longer serve as the basis of political legitimacy, Enlightenment scholars were concerned about the dangers moral relativism could pose for the maintenance of social order. “I want my attorney, my tailor, my valets, and even my wife to believe in God,” Voltaire wrote, which he thought would make him less likely to be cheated (on). This is why, he famously quipped, “if God did not exist, it would be necessary to invent him” (Voltaire, 1768/1885, p. 402). In *The Social Contract* (1762), Jean-Jacques Rousseau rose up precisely to this task with his concept of “civil religion.” Rousseau agreed with Thomas Hobbes that political authority needed an all-encompassing spiritual legitimation but disagreed that the answer lied in the instrumentalization of Christianity by secular government. He wrote that “a Christian Republic” was a contradiction in terms, because Christianity did not have the capacity to unify the nation as a whole. Instead, “a purely civil profession of faith” or a “civil religion” had to be created above all individual belief systems to foster “sentiments of sociability” and encourage being “a good citizen” and “a loyal subject.” This civil religion should be simple and clear; it should uphold a belief in a deity, an afterlife where reward and punishment are incurred, as well as promote values of tolerance towards specific religions (Rousseau, 1762/2012, p. 270). Thus began the long journey of a concept that would prove crucial for the imminent French Revolution, the work of Durkheim, and later, the American sociology of religion (Bellah, 1967).³ The concept marked the genesis of the search for a secular alternative to the social meanings and functions formerly realized by traditional religion. The next section surveys three such attempts in the nineteenth century that directly informed classical sociologists.

New Society, New Religion?

At the height of the French Revolution’s fierce confrontation with the Catholic Church, the works of Voltaire and Rousseau stimulated the two short-lived earthly state religions devised by the revolutionaries. The atheistic Cult of Reason (1793–4) and Maximilien Robespierre’s deistic Cult of the Supreme Being (1794), despite variances in their doctrines, both attempted to fill the void caused by Catholicism’s demise to inspire republican unity and order via complex secular belief systems colored by festivals, rituals, and symbols (Vovelle, 1988). In the subsequent century, soon after Napoléon Bonaparte reached a new entente with the Church and outlawed the two secular cults, the first scholarly effort to fashion a modern religion came from Henri de Saint-Simon.

A French businessman and an early socialist thinker, Saint-Simon upheld the Enlightenment view that although religion was useless for science, it could be desirable for society. He wrote that “the Catholic system was in contradiction with the system of modern science and industry, hence its downfall was inevitable,” and added elsewhere: “but I am not saying that it should not be used in political combinations” (cited in

³ Although Rousseau was the first to use the term, the idea behind civil religion has a much longer history in the annals of political philosophy (Beiner, 2011). In its modern journey, the concept went through significant transformations—for instance, Rousseau’s understanding of civil religion as a state doctrine differs significantly from Bellah’s Durkheim-inspired view of it as a culture of civic sentiment (Cristi, 2001).

Musso, 1999, p. 28). Yet unlike Rousseau, Saint-Simon witnessed the failure of the secular cults of the Revolution, which convinced him of the need of a refurbished Christianity attuned to the needs of the nascent industrial society. In his 1825 book *Nouveau Christianisme*, he promoted a rationalized Christian religion that honors labor as a sacred act, cherishes the fraternity of workers and a moral economy, and promises paradise on earth through industrialist social organization in congruity with the sciences and the arts. Accordingly, “the whole human kind would have but one religion, one organization” under the name of Christianity, which would become the “general, universal, and unique religion” (Saint-Simon, 1825, pp. 9, 45).

As his personal secretary and editor of his journal *l'Industrie*, August Comte picked up where Saint-Simon left off—although not before a bitter personal and philosophical falling-out with him. In his well-known “law of three stages,” the founder of sociology framed humanity’s intellectual evolution as a linear story of secularization. In the first stage (theological, or fictitious), humanity resorted to gods and deities to make sense of the universe; in the second (metaphysical, or abstract), it held on to intangible notions that were an extension of the first. Only in the third stage (scientific, or positivist) could humanity do away with the shackles of faith to ascertain societal laws based on observation and rationality. Yet positivism was not a mere epistemological instrument for Comte; it was also a moral doctrine, or a “true, complete, and real” religion based on order, progress, solidarity, and altruism (another word he coined). Unlike Saint-Simon’s insistence to work with Christianity, however, Comte’s *System of Positive Polity, or Treatise on Sociology, Instituting the Religion of Humanity* (1851–4) turned sociology itself into a religion. Accordingly, Christian worship, doctrine, and morality could be substituted with those of the positivist religion of humanity, or *Église positiviste*. Although the intricate sacraments he conceived for this new religion earned him more ridicule than followers—contemporary biologist Thomas Huxley called it “Catholicism minus Christianity”—, Comte’s work represents an elaborate project to complete and coalesce the Enlightenment’s epistemological and normative critiques of religion, amounting to a call for its total substitution by science. Comte’s sociology was built on these intellectual foundations.

Ludwig Feuerbach differs from Saint-Simon and Comte in that he never proposed a secular church to replace existing religions. His ambitious task was rather to outline a new *understanding* of religion that, in his own words, aimed to “reduce theology to anthropology,” or replace God with human. In a similar vein as Hume a century before him, yet in a sternly post-Hegelian fashion, Feuerbach’s *The Essence of Christianity* (1841) found the roots of religion in material human existence and viewed God and creed as nothing but projections of human attributes and needs. Instead of alienating its true essence in vague ideas of divinity, humanity should directly connect with its own nature, as well as the worldly notions of reason, will, goodness, and morality, without the intermediary. As the book was reproached by some for beating Christianity, Feuerbach (1841/2012, pp. x, xvi) conceded in the preface to its second edition that “certainly, my work is ... destructive; but, be it observed, *only in relation to the unhuman, not to the human elements of religion.*” This crucial distinction paved the way for the empirical, social scientific study of religion that was about to begin, as “the development of a nonmetaphysical approach to religious phenomena originated to some extent from Feuerbach’s anthropology” (Cipriani, 2015, p. 23). When

Marx embarked on his mission to turn Hegel's idealism upside down, he knew he owed a lot to Feuerbach.

Classical Sociology Meets Religion

The three founding figures of sociology were not personally religious, and they fully internalized the Enlightenment view of religion as irrelevant for scientific ways of knowing. Nonetheless, the analysis of religion was fundamental to their work, though Durkheim and Weber differed from Marx in three important ways: They spent more time to study religion as an empirical phenomenon and a subjective experience; their work had a much larger impact on the American sociology of religion, and they did not normatively advocate for religion's disappearance—while fully acknowledging that modernity would continue changing it in irreversible ways. The thematic synopsis that follows in this section will undoubtedly fail to do justice to these authors' wide-ranging concepts and theories about religion (for a more comprehensive analysis, see Adair-Toteff, 2015; Marx & Raines, 2002; Pickering, 1984). The focus here is on the study of religion as a constituent of social power by Marx, as a promoter of social solidarity by Durkheim, and as an agent of social change by Weber (Dawson & Thiessen, 2014). Although not exhaustive, these themes speak to the lasting influence these classical sociologists have made on the secularization debate, and the social scientific study of religion in general.⁴

Marx: Religion and Social Power

Marx's lifetime friend and collaborator Friedrich Engels (1886) wrote that upon reading *The Essence of Christianity* in the early 1840s, their "enthusiasm was general; we all became at once Feuerbachians." Marx's early writings indeed praised Feuerbach for exposing Hegel's idealist philosophy as another form of theology, and for making it possible to construe religion as an anthropological phenomenon based on material reality. Yet Marx soon was disillusioned by Feuerbach due to what he saw as his detachment of humanity from its socio-historical context and activities. In *Theses on Feuerbach* (1845), he wrote that "Feuerbach resolves the religious essence into the human. But the human essence is no abstraction inherent in each single individual. In its reality it is the ensemble of the social relations" and "belongs in reality to a particular form of society" (Marx, 1978, p. 145). To understand religion would thus require understanding the social structure and relationships in which it resides.

Religion for Marx was hereafter conceived as a superstructural and/or ideological entity—in any case, mostly an *explanandum*, or an occurrence that is elucidated by another rather than having an autonomous standing. This is because, as

⁴ I bring to the fore these particular legacies due to their direct relevance for the sociological perspective on secularization, which structures my survey. This, of course, led to the omission of other important intellectual lineages. Among others, Weber's discussion of prophets and priests featured in his *The Sociology of Religion* (1922), which informed Pierre Bourdieu's field theory (Hutt, 2007), or the impact of Durkheim's *Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1912) on the sociology of knowledge and classification (Bloor, 1982), could not be included in the analysis.

he put it, “religious world is but the reflex of the real world” (Marx, 1978, p. 326). And in that real world, Marx understood the forces and relations of production to be the genuine foundation, on which rose legal and political superstructures as well as related forms of social consciousness. As part of the superstructure, religion and religious institutions may be in a reciprocal relationship with the economic base, but they are ultimately shaped by it and have to adapt to its changing conditions. In Marx’s materialist conception of society and history, “morality, religion, metaphysics, *all the rest of ideology and their corresponding forms of consciousness* thus no longer retain their semblance of independence” (Marx, 1978, pp. 154–155).

At the ideological level, “opium of the people” is likely Marx’s most frequently quoted phrase, taken to mean that he equated religion to a dogma of passivity that dulls the senses and legitimizes oppression. This is only partially true. On the hand, Marx did claim in *The German Ideology* (1845) that with *material* force comes *intellectual* force: Ruling classes breed the dominant ideas of their epoch, including religious ones, to maintain an unjust status quo and keep subordinate groups in check. On the other hand, when put in context, the “opium of the people” phrase in his “Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right: Introduction” (1844) paints a more complicated picture: “*Religious* suffering is at one and the same time the *expression* of real suffering and a *protest* against real suffering. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the sentiment of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the *opium* of the people” (Marx, 1978, p. 54).

Marx was not the first person to employ this metaphor—opium, moreover, was predominantly used in the nineteenth century for medicinal purposes without the same negative connotations as one might find today (Mckinnon, 2005). What makes this line especially noteworthy is that it assigns religion a role of comforting misery *as well as* fighting against it. In a dialectical style emblematic of him, Marx highlights here the dual nature of religion (and of ideology in general): legitimating existing power relations, but also, depending on the socio-historical context, enabling criticism and mobilization (Boer, 2011). Although Marx himself paid little attention to religion per se after his turn towards political economy around 1845, Engels’ historical analyses on early Christianity as a proto-socialist movement, the progressive strands within the Protestant Reformation in Germany, and the impact of Puritanism on the English Revolution exemplify religion’s potentiality for positive social change in the Marxist canon (Löwy, 1998).

Marx did advocate for the disappearance of religion, but secularization was never a goal in itself; it was rather a demand for eradicating the unjust dynamics of social power that maintain it. As he put it, “the struggle against religion is ... a struggle against that world whose spiritual aroma is religion,” which had to be replaced by revolution, because “the criticism of religion ends with ... the categorical imperative to overthrow all those conditions in which man is an abased, enslaved, abandoned” (Marx, 1978, pp. 54, 60). In this regard, Marx’s normative stance against religion differs drastically from the twenty-first century campaigners of atheism (such as Richard Dawkins or Christopher Hitchens), as it is firmly embedded in a vision of socialist transformation.

Durkheim: Religion and Social Solidarity

As the primary architect of sociology that elevated it to an autonomous field of scientific inquiry, Durkheim's epistemological position was built on a critique of what he saw as a crude form of positivism in Comte. In the *Rules of the Sociological Method* (1895), Durkheim applauded Comte's plea for investigating social phenomena in the same order as the natural world, but he took issue with his "metaphysical" assessment of social evolution and attempt to replace religion with sociology—which he believed was harmful to the legitimacy of the nascent discipline. With a view to demarcating sociology from contemporary competitors such as psychology and social philosophy, Durkheim's social realism accentuated the empirical study of social facts: "the beliefs, tendencies and practices of the group taken collectively," which are capable of an external constraint over the individual or society as a whole "whilst having an existence of its own, independent of its individual manifestations" (Durkheim, 1895/2014, pp. 23, 47). Religion, as is well known, was a foremost social fact that Durkheim explored in his own work.

Less well known is that although an agnostic and a keen proponent of scientific objectivity, Durkheim was convinced that the sociologist should develop a deep sympathy with religions and religious groups in empirical research—a consideration that is not found in Marx. "Let him feel it as the believer feels it; what it is to the believer is really what it is," Durkheim said, for "an irreligious interpretation of religion would be an interpretation which denied the phenomenon it was trying to explain" (cited in Pickering, 1984, p. 96). Coming somewhat close to Weber's notion of *verstehen*, or meaningful understanding (more on that concept below), Durkheim defied here those who derided religion as a type of hallucination unworthy of scientific analysis. This, of course, was far from an invitation to integrate religious explanations in sociological ones, but rather a recognition that insofar as it shapes institutions, social bonds, and human sentiments and actions, religion is a social fact, and thus irrefutably "real."

Durkheim famously excluded God from his definition of religion. Like Marx, he found the basis of religion in social relations, yet unlike him, he did not limit those to economic ones. In *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1912), which took an Australian indigenous community as a case study, he defined religion as "a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things," which fuses a group of people "into one single moral community." Religion is "an eminently collective thing" that reproduces what is sacred and what is profane, constituting the bedrock of society's *conscience collective*—or its collective consciousness and conscience (Durkheim, 1912/1995, p. 44). Drawing on the sacred-profane distinction, religion forges mutual bonds and identity, a myth of origin and shared history, a set of moral rules and guidelines, social gatherings and rites, institutions and symbols associated with tradition, and an emotional effervescence that strengthens the unity of the group. Religion, in short, is society worshipping itself.

Amidst the religious controversies of *fin de siècle* French Third Republic, a key question that occupied Durkheim was how *conscience collective* could be preserved in the face of traditional religions' ever-declining dominance. As Lewis Coser wrote in the introduction to Durkheim's *The Division of Labour in Society* (1893/2013, p. xix), "much of Durkheim's later work can be read as a continuing

effort to define the basis for a kind of civic religion which ... would provide common values” in modernity. His book *Suicide: A Study in Sociology* (1897/2002), apart from being a foundational text demonstrating the application of the sociological method, was a testament to his concern about the loss of social integration, and discussed the variations thereof in Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish cultures. As a consequence of secularization, Durkheim’s own assessment was that the “cult of the individual” functioning in the framework of national citizenship could become society’s new civil religion—although he never used Rousseau’s concept. Holding the individual person’s autonomy and democratic rights as sacred, the “cult of the individual” celebrates common secular-national values, symbols, and rituals while respecting the diversity of persons and belief systems in society (Carls, 2019). *Conscience collective*, therefore, will likely take secularized forms with the weakening of religious monopolies.

Durkheim’s take on secularization, however, was more an observation than a normative stance. As he wrote in *The Division of Labour in Society* (1893/2013, p. 132), “if there is one truth that history has incontrovertibly settled, it is that religion extends over an ever diminishing area of social life. Originally ... everything social was religious ... Then gradually political, economic and scientific functions broke free from the religious function, ... and taking on more and more a markedly temporal character.” This quote perfectly encapsulates the differentiation thesis, as systematized by Talcott Parsons (1966), that defined the secularization scholarship since the twentieth century. Durkheim developed a nuanced understanding of secularization as a process of religious change rather than disappearance. As he put it in the conclusion of *Elementary Forms* (1912/1995, p. 433), “religion obviously cannot play the same role in the future as it did in the past. However, religion seems destined to transform itself rather than disappear.”

Weber: Religion and Social Change

The historical depth, geographical scope, and conceptual range of Weber’s sociology of religion surpass those of Marx and Durkheim alike. In addition to Western Christianity, Weber wrote on Hinduism and Buddhism in India, Confucianism and Taoism in China, and Jewish and Muslim civilizations—and thus laid the foundations of a comparative-historical sociology of religious phenomena (Kalberg, 2012). In his approach to the study of religions, he went far beyond Durkheim’s in-passing remarks on the sociologist’s task to sympathize with believers. Informed by the larger framework of his *verstehenden soziologie*, or interpretive sociology (Weber, 1913/1981), Weber prioritized the comprehension of the various types of religious experience, affect, and religiously motivated action from the perspective of the subject. Accordingly, a sweeping a priori definition of religion would be futile, because, as noted in the beginning of his *The Sociology of Religion* (1922/1963, p. 1), “the external courses of religious behavior are so diverse that an understanding of this behavior can only be achieved from the viewpoint of the subjective experiences, notion, and purposes of the individuals concerned.”

Despite its impressive breadth, none of Weber’s work on religion has been as influential or controversial as *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1905), voted the fourth most important book of the twentieth century by the

International Association of Sociology. Weber's argument is perhaps the most well known in sociology: Early Protestantism, especially the Lutheran understanding of calling (*Beruf*) and the Calvinist conception of predestination, engendered a novel spirit and corresponding behavioral changes that paved the way for capitalist transformation. Previously limited to clerical work, *Beruf* was extended by Martin Luther to any type of vocation, instilling in believers a work ethic construed as a form of serving God. Still, the Lutheran conception of calling was tied to economic traditionalism. The real revolution came with Jean Calvin's gloomy take on salvation. Calvinist doctrine predestined most souls to hell but a few chosen ones, and rendered knowing or changing the outcome impossible, which led believers to look for signs of chosenness in wealth gained by meticulous work and the strict avoidance of enjoyment and wastefulness. Thus was born an "inner-worldly asceticism" in multiple Protestant sects—including Calvinist, Pietist, Methodist, Quaker, Baptist, and Mennonite—that fashioned highly disciplined values and daily practices, producing an unintended consequence of facilitating capital accumulation.

It has been long argued that *The Protestant Ethic* overturned Marx's logic to demonstrate how religion itself could be an *explanans*, or an autonomous entity that contributed to economic development and social change. While this is partially true, Weber is careful to not depict a zero-sum game. In the book's final paragraph, he underlines that his goal is not to replace "one-sided 'materialistic' analysis" with a "one-sided spiritualistic" one, as how "Protestant asceticism was in turn influenced ... by ... economic conditions should also have its day" (Weber, 1905/2012, p. 125). This emphasis was not merely a rhetorical trick to shield against potential criticism. Utilized in this book to encapsulate the dynamic between Protestantism and capitalism, Weber's concept of "elective affinity" informed many of his other works to ascertain a reciprocal relationship and adaptation between ideas and interests, spiritual and material processes, and social and economic realms with a view to avoiding monocausal explanations concerning religious and other phenomena (Löwy, 2004).

The Protestant Ethic is also a somber secularization story. Despite coming to life in a religious framework, capitalist relations gradually stripped themselves of the ascetic ethical halo to place individuals in the "steel-hard casing" (or the "iron cage") of a purely interest-driven, instrumentally rational, calculating world (Weber, 1905/2012, p. 123). Weber was more interested in, and indeed worried about, secularization as the rationalization and disenchantment of values and action than as the functional differentiation of social and political institutions. As he wrote elsewhere, "the course of development involves ... the bringing in of calculation into the traditional brotherhood, displacing the old religious relationship," which ends "naive piety and its repression of the economic impulse" (Weber, 1927/1950, p. 356). The same secularizing process is also at work for the "intellectualization" of scientific epistemology. In his 1917 lecture "Science as a Vocation," Weber argued that with the rise of rationalization, there are no longer "mysterious incalculable powers that come into play, but rather that one can, in principle, master all things by calculation. This means the world is disenchanted" (Weber, 1946, p. 139).

Discussion: Religion and the Sociological Field

Many highly influential figures and themes that shaped sociology's early outlook on religion had to be left out of this intellectual history due to practical reasons. To name but a few: Alexis de Tocqueville (1835/2010), who perceived the diversity of Christian churches in America as contributive to republicanism and democracy; Ernst Troeltsch (1906/1958), who observed the severance of religious content from multiple aspects of contemporary Protestant culture; Georg Simmel (1997), whose work examined religious sensations and social interactions to lay the groundwork for a microsociology of religion; and later, Alfred Schutz (1962), the religious phenomenology of whom directly influenced mid-century secularization scholars Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann. Despite being non-exhaustive, the brief genealogy of social thought on religion and secularity presented here allows for drawing inferences about its significance for the development of the sociological discipline in epistemological, normative, and empirical dimensions.

Epistemologically, there is little doubt that the post-Enlightenment trend is a disentanglement of social thinking from the premises of religion. From the empiricism-rationalism debates culminating in Kantian philosophy all the way to Feuerbach's anthropological critique of Hegelian idealism, the intellectual survey indicates that religion was increasingly divorced from the emergent scientific ways of knowing the natural world, and later, the social realm. Yet it would be a mistake to see religion's role here as inconsequential; on the contrary, it is precisely by distinguishing the epistemology of the social from that of the religious that early sociology was able to identify society as its own, autonomous object of inquiry, and cultivate related analytical tools. Marx's determination to explain religion brought him to the analysis of society as an ensemble of power relations built on class dynamics. Durkheim's exploration of religion led him to construe society as a network of solidarity reinforced by shared meaning systems and rituals. Weber's comprehension of subjective religious experience enabled him to see how ideas relate to action and can potentially produce social change. These preliminary accounts germinated the materialist, functionalist, and interpretive perceptions of the social, and subsequently a larger set of approaches to study religious and other societal phenomena. In short, the critical engagement with religion both as an instrument and a topic of investigation facilitated early sociology to delineate the nature of its very craft.

Normatively, given the rise of science and the ideal of religious pluralism since the Enlightenment, the main question became what could replace religion as a source of social morality and unity—or how God could be reinvented, to paraphrase Voltaire. The initial response came from Rousseau's "civil religion," followed by the French revolutionary cults, Saint-Simon's reformed Christianity, and Comte's *Église positiviste*. Even Marx's vision of communist society has been placed in this line of thinking by critics, seen to be offering a kind of secular salvation or a post-religious heaven on earth (Rothbard, 1990). With Durkheim and Weber, however, there was a discernable change towards discretion and moderation. Part of how sociology became a legitimate profession at the turn of the century was by distancing itself from sharply normative claims and public statements concerning religion, be it in the form of freethinking philosophy or Christian theology that both marked the age. Durkheim rejected Comte's positivist church as well as Catholic clericalism in France; Weber

famously advised value-neutrality for the social scientist. And while remaining personally non-religious and methodologically atheist, both scholars' work displayed genuine curiosity for comprehending the religious experience of believers.

This is not to say, of course, that Durkheim and Weber were not as normatively guided on the matter as Marx was. As Marx celebrated the emancipation from religion as intricately linked to socialist transformation, Durkheim was concerned with the decline of *conscience collective* and social integration in a religiously heterogeneous world, and found the answer in another civil religion, namely his “cult of the individual.” Weber, on his part, was deeply troubled by the loss of substantial meaning and values through rationalization, but failed to propose a remedy to what he perceived as the reduction of society to instrumental calculations. In diverse ways, thinking about religion and its future prompted early sociologists to self-reflexively consider the discipline's involvement with normative questions and positionality vis-à-vis contemporary social affairs.

Empirically, what can be properly called a sociological take on religion was not to be found in the Enlightenment, although the *philosophes'* careful dissection of theological claims and other precursors such as Hume, Feuerbach, and early Marx laid the groundwork for a socially embedded analysis of religious phenomena. One had to wait for Durkheim's *Suicide* (1897) and *Elementary Forms* (1912) and Weber's *Protestant Ethic* (1905) for a preliminary showcasing of methodologies that pertain to the study of religion. Notably, these works are not merely among the foundational classics for the sociology of religion, but for sociology as a whole. That some of the earliest examples of modern social science dealt with the religious question in multifaceted ways is a testament to the latter's impact on the discipline's formation. From these first attempts grew a whole set of qualitative (participant observation, interviewing, content analysis, comparative-historical examination, etc.) and quantitative methods (such as surveys, polls, demographic and statistical analyses, among others), and a combination thereof, that are widely used in the social scientific study of religion today (Roberts & Yamane, 2012). The early interest in the empirical study of religion, it should be noted, was not coincidental. Observing an astounding process of religious change via capitalist transformation, social differentiation, and intellectual rationalization urged early sociologists to engross themselves in the issue of secularization—Marx, Durkheim, and Weber's works leave no doubt about their fascination with the topic.

The long line of European thinking on religion and secularity in these three dimensions has had a direct influence on American sociology and its various approaches towards to the topic. This is despite the fact that the study of religion in the US took quite different forms than in Europe, partially because of the higher diversity and vitality of religious belief and institutions in American society, and the fact that early sociology in the US was embedded in the Christian social work and activism perspective of the Social Gospel Movement (Blasi, 2014). Jane Addams, for instance, was deeply inspired by Gospel theology as she developed her humanitarian vision for society in the age of industrialism, which she thought—in ways comparable to, yet different than Saint-Simon—paved the way for a “Christian renaissance” marked by solidarity, moral progress, and peaceful social transformation (Villadsen, 2018). W.E.B. Du Bois, although he was not personally religious, became a pioneer of empirical sociological research on religion in the United States. Amalgamating ethnography, interviews, surveys, and census data, he studied the Protestant institutions,

customs, and rituals that were embedded in the lives of Black Americans to conclude that religion provided cohesion and collective consciousness that underpinned their racial identity and groupness (Segre, 2021).

Still, from the 1920s onward, American sociology began largely converging with the European path by manifestly emphasizing its scientific credentials to gain wider legitimacy, and thereby defining itself in sharp epistemological and normative distinction from religion (Dynes, 1974).⁵ Ironically, although here too religion played a constitutive role for sociology's self-awareness, the critical engagement with religion might also have contributed to its relative dismissal, at least for a number of decades, as a subject of empirical research in the discipline (Smith et al., 2013, p. 905). The topic nevertheless continued to interest and inform sociological theory in the postwar era. Talcott Parsons' structural functionalism drew on Durkheimian and Weberian traditions to emphasize religion's integrative role in the social system, and the ways in which it creates meaning to motivate social action (Robertson, 1982). Meanwhile, the Frankfurt School scholars located in the US helped advance the Marxian lineage by examining religion within their wider critical social analysis (Brittain, 2012).

With the advent of the secularization scholarship in the 1960s—which embraced the Parsonian notion of differentiation—the conversation on religion's future once again became the order of the day. With variations, scholars like Peter Berger (1967) and Thomas Luckmann (1967) in the US, and David Martin (1969) Bryan Wilson (1966) in Europe underscored the increasing pluralization, individualization, privatization of religion as markers of its diminishing social significance. From the 1980s onwards, the foremost critique of the theory came from the religious economies school in the US, which argued that pluralism in fact rendered individual religiosity livelier than ever in modern times, and declared secularization a myth (Stark & Bainbridge, 1985; Warner, 1993). As Davie (2003, p. 69) notes, while both paradigms draw on the nineteenth century classics, one should not lose sight of “the European origins of the secularization thesis as opposed to the American genesis of the new paradigm.” This is mainly due to the two continents' contrasting religious landscapes: The continued vigor and variety of religious life in America could not but lead to a questioning of assumptions about secularization as a natural outcome of modernization. All in all, despite—or perhaps, because of—its controversies, secularization never ceases to stimulate novel generations of scholars focusing on modernity and religious change. It remains one of the longest standing paradigmatic debates in sociology on both sides of the Atlantic, which has persistently defined and redefined the scope of the discipline since its first steps (for two recent appraisals, see Stolz, 2020; Turner, 2019).

Conclusions

“The history of sociology through the early decades of the 20th century is simultaneously the history of the social scientific study of religion” (Ebaugh,

⁵ Similarly in France, the study of religion witnessed a shift from the Catholic-inspired *sociologie religieuse* (religious sociology) to *la sociologie des religions* (the sociology of religions), which put more emphasis on scientific neutrality and the investigation of a wider set of religious traditions (Willaime, 2017, pp. 40–60).

2002, p. 386). Taking a closer look at these conjoint histories through a systematic overview, this article has argued that sociology's early engagement with religion—from its roots in the European Enlightenment to its subsequent evolution in the United States—has been critical for its development on epistemological, normative, and empirical fronts. The findings suggest a variegated interaction with religion rather than indifference or a simple aversion, as often assumed, and confirm that the emergence and maturation of sociology owed a great deal to its involvement with the religious question. Epistemologically, religion often became sociology's constitutive other as it sought to establish itself as a legitimate scientific field. Normatively, religion constantly pushed sociology to contemplate its own values, motivations, and underlying suppositions about the social good. And empirically, religion inspired some of the earliest sociological works that spawned a wide set of methodological innovations that defined the discipline. In investigating the progression and interaction of these three dimensions, the analysis advances the research agenda to “historicize sociology and religion,” which, especially in a period marked by the global resurgence of public religions and a renewal of scholarly curiosity in the topic, may contribute to a self-reflexive consideration that informs future studies (Smith et al., 2013, p. 919).⁶

Deliberations related to these three themes are far from over in the contemporary sociology of religion, which speak to the discipline as a whole. Epistemologically, methodological atheism has been critiqued as counterproductive to sociology's goals (Porpora, 2006), and the various ways of applying qualitative, quantitative, and mixed research designs to study religions constantly abound (Riis, 2009). Normatively, the secularization literature and the larger sub-discipline has reflected on its involvement with value judgments concerning the place of religion in society (Dromi & Stabler, 2019; Smilde & May, 2015), and the concept of civil religion, as applied to the American context by Bellah (1967), remains a source of inspiration to reconcile pluralism and common societal values (Gorski, 2019). Empirically, in addition to the dominant Durkheimian and Weberian paradigms, Marxian perspectives on the critical study of religion have also gained significant ground (Goldstein, 2012). The geographical scope, moreover, has expanded beyond the Western world to study religion as a dependent and independent variable on macro, micro, and meso levels of analysis (Herzog et al., 2020). Some themes include the investigation of religion in social institutions such as healthcare, sports, and education; the study of diverse religious sects and organizations; intersections with race, gender, and social inequality; and politics, globalization, and transnationalism (Cipriani, 2021). In sum, “religion will remain a vital arena of research among sociologists,” and as before, the “study of religion” as a multilayered phenomenon has the potential to “enrich the discipline as a whole” in the twenty-first century (Martí, 2014, p. 503). Engaging with the question of religion and secularity continues to matter for sociology's future, as much as it did for its history.

⁶ For instance, further historical research can shed light on the specific ways in which early sociology's interaction with religion in these three dimensions might have instilled “deep cultural assumptions and categories” about the topic to facilitate its relative omission or marginalization for extended periods of time in twentieth century sociology (Smith et al., 2013, p. 919).

Declarations

Conflict of Interest The author states that there is no conflict of interest.

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