



14.1 What Is Religion, and What Are Its Functions?

A SOCIOLOGICAL UNDERSTANDING OF RELIGION

The study of religion and society occupies a unique place in the history of sociology. The first intellectual to call himself a sociologist, Auguste Comte, thought that sociology would lead to a modern “religion of humanity,” with scholars such as himself fulfilling the functions of priests. More importantly, religion was central to the classic work of two of the most-read sociologists in history, Max Weber and Emile Durkheim. Weber wrote what is perhaps the most frequently read book in sociology, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (Weber [1904] 1958), in which he argued that the ascetic form of Protestantism that flourished in nineteenth-century America was critical in the development of full-blown capitalism.

Perhaps the second most-read sociological book of all time is Durkheim’s *Suicide* (Durkheim [1898] 1951), which begins with a puzzle rooted in religion: Why do areas populated mainly by Protestants have much higher suicide rates than areas populated mostly by Catholics? Later in his career Durkheim wrote perhaps the most profound and influential sociological treatise on religion ever written, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (Durkheim [1912] 2001), in which he examined the religion of Australian aborigines and proposed that the idea of god basically represented the community or society.

In this chapter, we walk in the footsteps of giants as we investigate issues foundational to a sociological understanding of religion.

Defining Religion

14.1.1 Compare and contrast the different sociological definitions of religion.

Many sociologists are (and were) deeply religious people of one faith or another; today, while religion is important to many in their private lives, many would consider themselves

atheists (people who do not believe in the existence of God) and almost all seek to study religion through a scientific, not theological, lens (Gross and Simmons 2009). Privately, religious sociologists may hope that their work supports the argument for religion, even for their own religion. However, no sociologist today with a reasonable reputation would argue professionally and publicly that his or her beliefs are the one and only true faith, and that all others are wrong. Sociologists understand their field as part of the scientific approach to human affairs, and they know that science cannot answer a question that is so certainly a matter of faith.

Furthermore, sociologists do not even agree as to what they mean when they describe “religion.” There are many different and conflicting definitions in the literature. I have found it instructive to focus on two distinctive approaches: one that emphasizes sacredness, and a contrasting definition that emphasizes the supernatural. In *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (Durkheim 1912), Durkheim defines religion as the way that societies deal with things that are sacred—those things that are worthy of awe and special treatment and are not just mundane or everyday parts of life: sacred objects like the Torah, sacred behaviors such as the communion ritual, sacred places like Mecca, sacred times like Easter day, and sacred people such as monks or the Dalai Lama. In other words, religion creates symbolic boundaries between certain people, objects, times, places, and other things and events in the world.

Compare Durkheim’s definition with one used by the contemporary sociologists of religion Rodney Stark and Roger Finke: “Religion is concerned with the supernatural; everything else is secondary. . . . [It] consists of very general explanations of existence, including the terms of exchange with a god or gods” (Stark and Finke 2000:89–91). In this view, religion is a set of ideas describing the relations between the natural and the **supernatural**, including how earthly beings can obtain goods from other-worldly entities, be they healthy crops or eternal salvation.