

AN EXAMPLE OF A RE-WRITTEN PAPER: THE ORIGINAL DRAFT

The comments appended to the end of the paper chart its weaknesses; it is filled with inexact or inaccurate remarks, contradictory assertions, and mechanical flaws in the writing, most notably the repeated use of pronouns such as “this” or “it” without clearly defined referents.

*The text retains the corrections I made on the original. ~~Strikeouts~~ indicate words or phrase to be eliminated, **boldface** words or phrases that should be inserted, and **[bracketed text in red]** marginal comments (usually on the essay’s contents). The final paragraph in courier new type is the comment I appended to the original.*

Discuss the strengths and weaknesses of the classical theories of sociology [OK - can you come up with an original title?]

The classical theories of sociology, that is, of Max Weber and Emile Durkheim, were both monumental and flawed. Their main weakness lies in the weaknesses inherent in sociology: it is vague, unscientific, and reductive. **[Hmmm. Would you want to shout this out in Social Science? on what grounds do you make such charges?]** However, although their analyses of religion built from this flawed **social** science, they were keenly aware of sociology’s historical shortfalls **[perhaps less apparent when they wrote]** and factored this **[refers?]** into their arguments, which set precedents in the study of the sociology of religion. ~~Thus~~ They established religion as an explanation for **[MW more than ED]** social phenomena and moved religion into the sphere of authority **[means?]** and association with sociology.

Durkheim

Durkheim’s *Elementary Forms of Religious Life* looks for the root cause **of** and basis for modern religion and society **[not really society—religion, for instance, does not explain the clan structure]** and finds it in Totemism, which he relates to his definition of religion ~~set out at the forefront of his analysis~~. In this reductionism **[sp. Explain]**, his two main weaknesses quickly become apparent. Because his argument is based on one religion **[though the one he claims is formative for the rest]**, there is a limited scope of perspective and a great possibility **of for** missteps in his choosing **[choosing what?]**. In addition, by proving his theory by his own definition, Durkheim builds a circular argument that is in itself dangerously non-scientific.

~~In *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, Emile Durkheim~~ reduces the roots **[rather, he seeks to discover the origins of religion by examining what he takes to be its most basic type]** of religion to the most basic form, which he dubs Totemism. Using one religion as ~~one’s basis for the multiplicity of society’s religion~~ **the sample for analyzing/explaining the origins of multiple religious traditions** is like building a table on one big leg: it does not provide enough support or balance. Granted, one could argue; **that** this **[what?]** is part of the beauty of Durkheim’s theory—if one were to follow his reasoning, the worship of the Totem could provide the key to the relationships **hip** between ~~greater~~ society **[social structure?]** and religious behavior, **[awk.: in fact, “the worship of society itself (Pals, 105)” could be answered]** through the Totem. However, to simplify **[simplify what?]** this much is dangerous.

The first ~~inherent~~ danger **lies** in using one religion **[awk.:]** as a basis for all others; **using one religion as a model to explain the origin of all** is the personal aspect involved in such an

extreme reduction. At first glance, his reduction does make sense: at the foundation of all beliefs and cults are the same elements. By understanding **the** nature of these elements, we understand the causes of ~~the world~~ **religious beliefs & practices**. Thus, by finding the most primitive religion, Durkheim finds the purest [?], most elementary form of beliefs upon which to base his theory.

The process by which he goes about this has two potential downfalls: (a) a desire to prove one's own theory intertwined with personal perspective and (b) reality [?]. Although Durkheim searches for the most elementary religion, the reality remains that even the most elementary, archaic form of religion is a process of social evolution by the time it is formed [✓]. In the case **at issue**, of Totemism, it had ~~been around~~ **existed** for years ~~and long extinct~~ [it **wasn't extinct**] before it was first studied, and could thus challenge its unity [means?] (Durkheim, 216-217). To combat this threat to purity [?] or unity, Durkheim broke down the religion to its elements. In this [what?], he eliminated animism and naturism as possibilities for the elementary religion. Thus, many forms of reduction [what exactly is being reduced to what?], including throwing out some elementary forms of religion, were necessary. Sadly, when this is done, one comes to a grouping of beliefs that have gone through numerous steps of reduction by means of one sociologist's opinion [i.e., **there is no demonstrable way of determining that totemism is actually the most elementary form of religion**]. Although this reductionism is a sensible means of reaching the roots of religion, it begs the question: did we take a wrong turn and choose one of the tree's many roots or did we find the seed itself? This analysis will have to continue upon the assumption that Durkheim did indeed find the seed.

However, even if Durkheim did find the seed of the worship of society [or, of religion - **which he then determines is actually the worship of society**], "society" then becomes a limiting term [to what?]. Although he does reference Buddhism and other eastern religions in his creation of a definition of religion (Durkheim, 45), that [what?] is where the parallel [parallel between **what & what?**] ends. Durkheim tends to draw most parallels from Totemism to western society and Judeo-Christian systems of belief. This [avoid] could be argued as a strength of Durkheim's analysis, though, in that he was drawing from the traditions he had experienced and lived, rather than those he had only studied second-hand. Nevertheless, it [what?] does limit the scope of his argument.

In his definition [which is what?], Durkheim dismisses [?] other previous religions [definitions?]~~—~~in particular, that religion cannot be defined as a belief in the supernatural (Pals, 116). He asserts that if we look to the most primitive of religions, the "supernatural" [i.e., **they do not distinguish a supernatural realm**] as we know it today is non-existent. However, quite the contrary is true—although the current definition [indeed, according to ED, **they had none**] of "supernatural" was not fully comprehended by practitioners of Totemism, the concept of the supernatural was present—if by nothing else but the supernatural realm of the totem. Granted, Durkheim would have called it [what?] sacred, but many have argued that numerous aspects of the supernatural are present in Totemic cultic ritual (Pals, 116). The experience of the all-powerful is articulated in the Totem, and the all-powerful can [yes, though the evidentiary issue is whether the **Australians did so**] be equated with the supernatural (Cohen, 9/26). The supernatural also exists in Totemic practice through the use and understanding of mystery and magic.

Despite all of these downfalls, Durkheim's theory of religion does possess strength in simplicity of elemental [?] explanations. By setting out a definition of religion that is clear and concise (Durkheim, 52), Durkheim creates something many authors were too cautious to create.

This [avoid] lends the paper as much science [why is creating a definition “scientific?”] as is possible in the sphere of sociology and religion. Through his definition’s beliefs and rites, the precedent [?] of religion as an observable phenomenon in which concrete instances of the sacred and profane can be found is established.

Unfortunately, this [avoid] brings one to the downfall of the circularity of Durkheim’s argument. By referencing his own definition through *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, he becomes “too inclined to offer definitions” that most easily accommodate the theory he is working to defend [how? what is his definition, anyway?]. In other words, the analysis begins where it ought to end (Pals, 115). It begins with a self-generated definition, which invited the same danger as the self-reductionism discussed earlier and creates a hypothesis based on a hypothesis. In addition, the document is full of blanket statements, such as “all known religious beliefs (Durkheim, 52).” It seems that when something is “known” to Durkheim, this [avoid] is often either opinion or his experience and something less concrete than it could be. For example, when he states that magic lacks a community (Durkheim 61), this [avoid] is merely a matter of lack of experience or personal opinion on what “community” means. [it is?]

The strength of Durkheim’s argument, beyond its elemental explanations, though, is in its application to the social as well as the religious. He makes the point that the sacred is equally valuable [means?] in parts as it is in its whole (Durkheim 261). This [avoid] puts value on even fragments of the sacred experience. Durkheim also moves outside of the religious sphere in calling symbols—for example, flags, tattoos, and clothing [?];— the official symbol of the social life (Durkheim 262) and a means of personal as well as group identity. [this sentence seems garbled]

In summation, Durkheim’s analysis falls flat in that he builds a table on what he felt were two solid legs—that of definition and that of example lived [?] out (i.e. Totemism). As time has shown and numerous authors have pointed out, the legs of this table were not as strong as he had hoped for. Nevertheless, they form an excellent basis [if the table is so malformed, how can it support anything?] for those who want to build a table of sociological theory of religion.

Weber

The inherent weakness of Weber’s accounts of the sociology of religion is that they are incomplete [in what sense?], and he constantly reminds readers of this. However, it is in his own lack of scope that one can find the beauty of his arguments: unlike Durkheim, he was not asserting that his analysis was universal and applicable to numerous spheres of religious life. On the contrary, he apologizes for his lack of understanding and marches on cautiously to explain capitalism and its causes in Western society.

Weber’s analysis allows for both flexibility [of what?] and sensibility [about?]. Rather than a means to an end, he reminds the reader that his analysis is merely a starting [for?] point and should be considered only as that (Weber, 183). Because of this [avoid], Weber sets a precedent [to do what?] more consciously than does Durkheim. He creates a basis for sociology of religion that is admittedly one-sided [how so?], but analyzes the one-sided [?] as well.

However, *Asceticism and the Spirit of Capitalism* does make assumptions that leave gaps in reasoning and logic. Throughout the chapter, he asserts that the values of ascetic Protestants are intimately linked to the capitalistic ethic. Weber says that from this ethic, a system of capitalism emerged that dismissed the Protestant values ~~it that had formerly used to support it itself~~. These values transformed into the capitalistic spirit, which all [?] are supposed to follow.

However, Weber does not weave the tale of how the capitalist system emerged [he just intends to provide part of the answer], and how ascetic Puritan values were replaced by something else. This [avoid] suggests a gap in Weber's theoretical model.

His model [of?], however, as set out in *The Sociology of Religion*, does explain numerous facets of Western and Eastern religious life and sets a stage for man and his relation to the world. It establishes the places that the religious sphere holds in modern society, and sheds more light on the supernatural (Weber, 7) that Durkheim had begun to explain. The explanations include modern society and the place of its participants and taboos, thus taking Durkheim's arguments one step further, going beyond the primitive.

Conclusion

The mystery of society's deep-seeded beliefs and interrelations can be understood both by looking back to our most elemental root and then our more recent, more evolved root. Both Weber and Durkheim were on the right track in these respects. However, if one ~~was~~ were looking for a broad-scope [it is hard for me to imagine a broader analysis than Weber's that would also be coherent] analysis of religion and society, neither would fit the bill. Thus, their theories must be used as roots for the study of sociology of religion, just as Protestantism and Totemism serve as roots for religious thought in society.

(Course Material) Works Cited

Freund, Julien, *The Sociology of Max Weber*, pp. 176-217

Weber, Max. *Sociology of Religion*, pp. 1-59

Weber, Max. *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, pp. 155-83

Pals, Daniel L. *Seven Theories of Religion*, pp. 88-123

Émile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, pp. 37-63, 121-49, 216-72

Your discussion of Weber is perfunctory enough that I don't think comments here are warranted, so I'll concentrate on your treatment of Durkheim, whose theory, you allege, like a one-legged table "does not provide enough support or balance" (1). You call his method, like sociology in general, "vague, unscientific, and reductive," but your own exposition suggests that, whatever else his argument may be, vague it is not, you do not explain what is "unscientific" about his procedure, and you misuse the term "reductionism." Durkheim has been accused (by Pals, among others) of reductionism, but that charge refers to his interpreting religion solely on the basis of its having a single social function, not to Durkheim's choosing a single example from which to derive his theory. You do not like Durkheim's using one religion as a model for all, and it is true that Durkheim asserts rather than demonstrates that the worship of society which is at the heart of religious life accurately characterizes more "complex" faiths than totemism, but in his own terms there is no problem with analyzing one form of religion if it is the most elementary; whether he skimps or not on, say, Buddhism is irrelevant. You do have a point that Durkheim can never entirely establish that totemism is indeed the most elementary form of religion; to add to your argument: the criteria he uses to establish what is "elementary" about aboriginal faith (e.g.,

loose social organization) are social phenomena, not religious ones; the religious forms may not be so elementary after all. Yet much of your analysis is inexact. You allude to Durkheim's definition of religion without citing it and fail to confront his most central contention: that religion is the worship of society, whose coercive power is represented totemically. You accuse Durkheim of being too subjective and of over-generalizing ("the document is full of blanket statements" [3]), but you do not provide a convincing example of his subjectivity (why does his statement that magic "lacks community" constitutes merely a "lack of experience or personal opinion on what community means" [2-3] indicate a faulty opinion? Has he no reasons for calling magic an individual as opposed to a social phenomenon? And, if he is wrong, why is he?). Moreover, as the marginal notes indicate, you make far too many unclear or awkward statements. If Durkheim's theory is as flawed as you say, how can it form "an excellent basis" for a "sociological theory of religion" (4)?

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