Weekly Question Discussion
(Sociology)
(Chapter-4 Paper-1)
How is Durkheim’s theory of religion different from Max Weber’s theory of religion?

Answer

- Max Weber (1864-1920) and Emile Durkheim (1858-1917), influenced by the events of their time, were compelled to look at religion. Each made a decided step away from positivist thought by giving to religion a unique and indispensable role in all forms of social organization.

- Contrary to much of the thinking about religion in their time, both men believed that religion was one of the real forces shaping modern society. Although different in orientation, each developed systematic theory for the sociological study of religion.

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<th>Émile Durkheim</th>
<th>Max Weber</th>
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<td><strong>1. Definition</strong></td>
<td>French sociologist Émile Durkheim (1858–1917), in his last published work, The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life, he defined religion as: “a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden – beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them”</td>
<td>With regard to Weber’s notion of religion, he famously refuses to define the term in his Sociology of Religion: To define “religion”, to say what it is, is not possible at the start of a presentation such as this. Definition can be attempted, if at all, only at the end of the study. The essence of religion is not even our concern, as we</td>
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<td><strong>2. Defining feature</strong></td>
<td>The key defining feature of religion for Durkheim was its ability to distinguish sacred things from profane things. Sacred objects are things said to have been touched by divine presence. They are set apart through ritual practices and viewed as forbidden to ordinary, everyday contact and use. Profane objects on the other hand are items integrated into ordinary everyday living. They have no religious significance.</td>
<td>He examined the effects of religious belief on economic activities. In his writing The Protestant Work Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism (1905), he contends that the Protestant work ethic influenced the development of capitalism by overturning the traditional anti-materialist Christian values of poverty. He focused on the development of the Protestant ethic—the duty to “work hard in one’s calling”—in particular Protestant sects such as Calvinism, Pietism, and Baptism.</td>
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<td><strong>3. Religion a source</strong></td>
<td>Durkheim saw religion as a source of social stability.</td>
<td>Max Weber (1864–1920) believed it was a precipitator of social change.</td>
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<td>4. Religion as a force</td>
<td>For Durkheim, religion was a force for cohesion that helped bind the members of society to the group.</td>
<td>While Weber believed religion could be understood as something separate from society.</td>
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| 5. Views | - Durkheim basically sees religion as an expression of the collective conscience.  
- The participation of the whole clan in some important rites helps to bring about collective enthusiasm, linking individuals into social bonds and making them aware of the awesome power of society. | Weber, in contrast, wishes to understand religion in relation to  
- economic,  
- political, and  
- historical factors. |
| 6. Gods and Spirits | - Durkheim denies that religion is concerned with the mysterious, with gods and spirits.  
- He holds that the object of worship is society itself, transformed and represented through certain symbolic objects. | Weber does not hesitate to use the idea of gods and spirits. |
| 7. Totem | Durkheim argues that the totem is the symbol of the clan. | Weber takes the example of a totem, which while worshipped as a symbol, is an animal that is sacrificially killed and eaten. |
| 8. Religious beliefs | In Durkheim’s terms, all religious belief and ritual function in the same way. They create a collective consciousness and a focus for collective effervescence in society. | Weber, unlike Durkheim, attaches great importance to prophets in propagating religious beliefs. |
| 9. Religion and Science | - Durkheim views both religion and science as providing society with its collective representations.  
- The classifications of science derive from those of religion. Thus there is no conflict or opposition between the two. | Science, as Weber views it, is an expression of rationality and a challenge to the traditional and mystical claims of religion.  
Thus science and religion, in Weber’s view, exist in contrast to each other. |
| 10. Religions studied | Studied primitive religions | Studied world religions |
## 11. Functions of Religion

Durkheim outlined three functions that religion still serves in society, which help to explain its ongoing existence in modern societies:

- Religion ensures social cohesion through the creation of a shared consciousness form participation in rituals and belief systems.
- Second, it formally enforces social norms and expectations of behavior, which serve to ensure predictability and control of human action.
- Third, religion serves to answer the most universal, ‘meaning of life’ questions that humans have pondered since the dawn

- Weber sees religion as part and parcel of a larger historical trend, namely, the move towards capitalism, industrialisation and rationality.
- He is concerned with the role of religion in making the world-view of individuals in different societies favourably or unfavourably inclined towards capitalism and rationalisation

## 12. Criticism

- One criticism of Durkheim’s structural functional approach to religion is that only the proper functioning process of religion is stressed and the dysfunctional areas are avoided.
- For instance much social conflict and many wars have been fought and continue to be fought in the name of a God or a specific religions belief.

Weber has been criticized for
- the lack of a full understanding of the Protestant doctrine,
- for a faulty interpretation of the Catholic one and of various forms of capitalism,
- for ignoring the non-religious intellectual sources,
- for the use of incorrect and incomplete statistics and
- for excessive generalization.

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### Some Terms

- **Collective consciousness**: is the shared set of values, thoughts, and ideas that come into existence when the combined knowledge of a society manifests itself through a shared religious framework.

- **Collective effervescence**: is the elevated feeling experienced by individuals when they come together to express beliefs and perform rituals together as a group: the experience of an intense and positive feeling of excitement.