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Emile Durkheim: Religion and Society Functionalist Perspective

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Emile Durkheim: Religion and society Functionalist Perspective (Sociology)

Introduction

Theories (Psychological) Of Religion before Durkheim:

- EB Tylor's theory of animism: "The belief in spirits" . He believed that religion is a response to man's intellectual needs and argued that this is the earliest form of religion. In ancient times, people believed in concepts of death and dreams and that the individuals used to appear in the dreams or visions of ancient people after the death. Thus, they believed that the person remains in touch in the form of 'soul' .
- James Frazer's theory of animatism: He believed that ancient people encountered with various objects in nature which had different characteristics of spirit or power and it led to the emergence of beliefs that it has some special characteristics and relation to God.
- Max Muller theory of naturism: "Forces of nature have supernatural power" . He argued that Hinduism is the most ancient religion and denotes worship of nature. Religion, according to him was a means of satiating man's emotional needs. He argued that Hindus believe in nature and develop rituals around natural objects and express their gratitude and that led to the emergence of religion.
- Emile Durkheim's theory of Religion is a functionalist perspective theory. He rejected the previous theories and said that Religion is the need of the society and not the individual. It aims to fulfil the basic needs of the society for e. g. solidarity, harmony, integration, etc.
- Durkheim studied the Arungtas tribes of Australia and in his book "The Elementary Forms of Religious Life" , he proposed an alternative theory that the first form of religion was totem worship and the theory that he proposed was known as 'totemism' . He argues it is the most simple and basic form of religion.

What is Totem?

- The Australian tribes that he studied named Arungtas were divided into many clans (large extended family with its members sharing certain duties and obligations with rules of exogamy) and they all had a religious symbol called totem. It could be a bird, a tree, an animal or any object that the individual of the clan considers as sacred and as an emblem of clan and it was worshipped as the symbol of the clan.

- Emile Durkheim said that when they worship the totem, they worship their own clan. He believed that society is God and when we worship God, we worship our society. He said that God and society are one. “Clan is the ultimate source of religion.”



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He said that religion itself is based on division into Sacred and profane:

- Sacred objects are the one which are related to the rituals, belief systems etc. they are symbols and represent something and differentiate one from another. They are accepted by the **collective consciousness or effervescence** of the society when it gathers every now and then around the sacred objects and worship each collectively it revitalizes the solidarity of society. They are considered superior than profane and can direct human action as they have more power.



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- Profane objects on the other hand represented not sacred objects and did not represent any collective consciousness. Individuals use such objects according to their needs and then destroy or discard them. Durkheim concluded that religion is a requirement of the society and each society needs the symbol and place where they can come together and revitalise their solidarity. Therefore, religion is a social fact and society is God and worshipping God is worship in the society.

Criticism of the Theory

Many anthropologists criticized his theory asking justification in defining totemism as a religion. They argued that the theory has little or no relevance in modern society and may stand true in small and uneducated societies.

- Marx believed that religion is a tool to exploit and divide the society he said it is the “opium of the people and heart of the heartless” . He argued that Religion should not exist in any society.
- Durkheim was criticised because he was asked how Arungtas are the most primitive tribe.
- He talked about the functional aspect of religion but did not discuss the dysfunctional part of it religion which is also the source of exploitation, tensions, customs, superstitions, etc.

Conclusion

- Religion strengthens togetherness and unity of a group and it promotes solidarity. The members together express their common faith and beliefs and thus, integration of the society is increased. He sought to show that roots of religion are in the social structure

of the society. It is the society that defines sacred and profane and there are social sources of religion.

- He saw totemism as the form of collective consciousness prevalent in the primitive society and said that religion and society are one and the same and he also identified society with God and said that religion improves the functioning and integration of the society.

MCQs

Q. 1. The book “Elementary forms of religious life” was written by

- Max Weber
- EB Tylor
- Emile Durkheim
- Mircea Eliade

Ans. iii

Q. 2. What is a correct match?

- Animism-EB Tylor , magic- Frazer , totem- Emile Durkheim
- Animism- EB Tylor, magic- Emile Durkheim, totem-Frazer
- magic -Tyler, animism -Emile Durkheim, totem - Frazer
- none of these

Ans. i

Q. 3. The book “The Golden Bough” was written by

- B. Tyler
- Paul Tillich
- Sigmund Freud
- James Frazer

Ans. Iv

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