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# **FUNDAMENTAL THEORY OF** **RELIGION**

AUTHORED BY - HANSHIKA MANKU

## **Abstract**

This paper focuses on the functional theory of religion. Religion is defined functionally in terms of the purposes it serves for individuals and/or society. Emile Durkheim is the father of modern sociology and talked about this theory. The functional theory of religion was given by Durkheim, but questions about functionalism were emerging before Durkheim as well.

Totemism might be explained without referencing any past religion. In other words, totemism's characteristics were unique to itself. Various other philosophers talked about this theory.

Keywords: Sacred- Profane, Durkheim, Functionalist, Totemism

## **<sup>1</sup>What is Functionalism?**

Earlier researchers attempted to construct conjecturally the historical development of human civilizations in their search for general principles regulating society. Functionalists, on the other hand, attempted to comprehend how modern society functioned. The first thing on their thoughts was whether or not a community existed in an orderly manner. A functionalist sees society as a system with interrelated pieces. Parts of this system fulfil certain duties in order for the systemic whole to be maintained or run. Now, the above form is a very simple version of functionalism. It has been simplified so that you may grasp it quickly. However, there are several differences within functionalist theory. Functionalism in sociology is established by researchers such as Malinowski, Radcliffe-Brown, Talcott Parsons, and Merton.

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<sup>1</sup> Fundamental Theory of Religion, Egyankosh, last visited on May 14, 2023, <https://egyankosh.ac.in/bitstream/123456789/21640/1/Unit-3.pdf>

## Emile Durkheim

Emile Durkheim (1858-1917), a French sociologist, is regarded as the founding father of modern sociology. He taught education and sociology at the University of Bordeaux before moving on to SOOM. He was a significant intellectual figure in France, and his impact could be seen in fields as diverse as law, history, and economics. His work might be interpreted as a response to some nineteenth-century notions on the nature of human affairs. For him, society came before individuality, and the social could not be reduced to the psychological. The Division of Labour in Society (1893), The Rules of Sociological Method (1895), Society - - (1897), and The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life (1912) are his most notable works.

### History behind the Functional Thinking

The functional theory of religion was given by Durkheim, but questions about functionalism were emerging before Durkheim as well.

Alexis de Tocqueville (1805-1859), a French scholar, recognised early on that religion may serve vital purposes in society. During his day, it was commonly believed among experts that religion did neither develop nor support democracy. Tocqueville, on the other hand, proved in his study of American Evangelical Protestantism that it aided the formation of the democratic spirit in America. Tocqueville suggested that Catholicism, with changes, might nurture a democratic spirit in France. Another French thinker, Auguste Comte, advocated a new 'religion of humanity' to foster greater societal engagement among the French.

Herbert Spencer (1820-1903), an English philosopher, formalised functionalist theory. He likened society to the human body. As we all know, there is natural coordination among the many organs in the human body.

Similarly, diverse organisations in society must naturally collaborate with one another. To be compatible with the rest of the sophisticated, industrial society's institutions.

Malinowski, the famed functionalist, wrote on religion, science, and magic and examined their

functions. Despite the fact that he supplied a plethora of data on primitive religious practises and beliefs, he did not bring any new notions to the study of religion. Another functionalist, Radcliffe-Brown, discussed the roles of religion. He drew largely on Durkheim's views.

Durkheim's theory of religion is significant because it inspired subsequent sociological study on religious occurrences.

Fustel de Coulange, a French historian, and Oscar Smith, a former Professor of Arabic students at Cambridge University believed that their religion had its origins in the very essence of early civilization. All members of a group, according to Robertson Smith, A tribe's clan was regarded to be of one blood. Because he was conceived as the bodily father of the clan-founder, the deity of the clan was also supposed to be of the same blood. In other words, the clan was the deity. Totemic animals were created as actual representations of this god. It was a holy communion to sacrifice the totemic creature and partake in its flesh and blood. Durkheim attempted to demonstrate how religion emerged from the mere existence of society, much inspired by this method. The goal of sociology, according to Durkheim (1895), is to investigate social facts. He defines social phenomena as those variables that are external to the person yet have a controlling impact on one's actions. He defines social facts as

- i) being exterior to the person,
- ii) exerting pressure on the individual, and
- iii) being objective, in the sense that they cannot be defined by individuals to suit themselves.

He chastised people who attempted to interpret religion through the lens of individual psychology. He inquired whether religion arose from a delusion. How could it have lasted so long and been discovered to exist globally? He said that many prehistoric societies took the so-called noteworthy natural forces--the sun, moon, sky, sea, and so on--for granted and saw them as ordinary occurrences. He stated that, in contrast, everyday creatures were adored in totemism, an early type of religion. These included creatures like bunnies, worms, and frogs, which do not strike us as awe-inspiring, magical, or amazing. He found the relevance of religion in its social context while accounting for their significance. In the next part, we will look at how Durkheim explained religion as a social phenomena.

## <sup>2</sup>Religion in terms of its functions

<sup>3</sup>When intellectuals were disillusioned with religion, Durkheim (1858-1917) came to explain religion's constructive benefits for society. Durkheim was dissatisfied with evolutionist theories because they failed to give religion significance as a social institution. Durkheim's key arguments regarding religion were published in a book called *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. It was initially published in French in 1912, and it was later translated into English in 1915. Durkheim used totemism as a test case to show the social functions of religion. Totemism among the central Australian tribes, as reflected in Spencer and Gillen's ethnography, came in useful for Durkheim. He picked totemism for study for two reasons: first, he thought it was a fundamental type of religion; second, he thought the sacred/profane difference came from totemic practice.

### **Totemism : An Elementary Form of Religion**

<sup>4</sup>Totemism was a fundamental form for Durkheim not because it was historically the first. Totemism was the most basic type since it was the simplest in terms of organisation. Furthermore, totemism might be explained without referencing any past religion. In other words, totemism's characteristics were unique to itself. It should be noted that Durkheim was opposed to animism and naturism. Animism and naturism both thought that religion evolved from early people's ignorance of nature. The term 'totem' has a special connotation in sociology. As previously said, the totem is a representation of the group or clan based on various crucial elements and situations. That is, a 'totem' is primarily a social symbol rather than an individual emblem. Whereas Durkheim claims that all religious beliefs "are true in their own way" for believers. He questioned the notion that religion arose from an error, a delusion. If that was the case, how could religion be so prevalent and long-lasting?

Second, he called into question the premise that animism was exclusively present in primitive communities. He mentioned that it was also seen in cultures such as China and Egypt. On the contrary, according to Durkheim, primitive groups took natural events for granted and exhibited little interest

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<sup>2</sup> Unicara, *The Functionalist view of Religion*, Sociologysaviour, Jul 16, 2015, <https://egyankosh.ac.in/bitstream/123456789/21640/1/Unit-3.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> Religion, CourseSidekick, last visited on May 13, 2023, <https://www.coursesidekick.com/sociology/study-guides/boundless-sociology/the-functional-perspective-on-religion>

<sup>4</sup> Josef Haekel, Totemism, Britannica, last edited on Sep 8, 2022, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/totemism-religion/additional-info#history>

in natural phenomena. He referred to naturism, or the worship of natural events, as a deceptive explanation for religious action. Thus, while criticising evolutionism in general, and naturism and animism in particular, Durkheim was able to explain how totemism gives birth to the dichotomy between 'sacred' and 'profane'.

## <sup>5</sup>Sacred and Profane

Totemism is a belief and ceremonial system centred on the totem. The totem is frequently an animal, vegetable, or mythological ancestor. The totem is holy, and it is revered. The totem cannot be addressed unless certain rites and ceremonies are performed. To approach the sacred totem, one must purify oneself both within and outwardly. However, the item at the heart of totemic religion is not an animal or a vegetable in the traditional sense.

Rather, the graphic portrayal of the animal or vegetable is revered. Totems are often used as a symbol of clan identification. The clan's totem is also the totem of its members. The profane world exists in opposition to the holy realm of totem. Humans and everything else unrelated to the sacred totem are included in the profane realm. Myths, stories, dogmas, and 'beliefs' all portray the holy totem, its power, virtues, and interaction with the profane world. The sacred and profane are distinct, and the borders between them are well defined. Durkheim (1964:38) defines the separation between the profane and the holy as "absolute." These two realms are even antagonistic to one another.

Durkheim Argues that this sort of sacred-profane dichotomy exists in all religions. It was previously stated that the profane can only reach the sacred by performing chain under certain conditions. These ceremonies are based on beliefs. In other words, the two main categories in which a religion is arranged are beliefs and rites. This type of dual structure in terms of beliefs and rites is significant because it explains religious functions, which we will learn about in the following section.

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<sup>5</sup> How Durkheim's idea of sacred and profane can be used to understand the contemporary society? , TriumphIAS, Jan 1, 2022, <https://triumphias.com/blog/how-durkheims-idea-of-sacred-and-profane-be-used-to-understand-the-contemporary-society/>

## <sup>6</sup>Functions of Religion

The distinction between cognition and action relates to the split of religious occurrences into two main categories, namely, beliefs and rituals. As a result, we may talk about religion's <sup>7</sup>cognitive and social functions.

- Cognitive functions

Religion has the power to shape people's thoughts and hence help them survive and adapt to their circumstances. Participation in religious practises results in the development of a superior 'person with power and vigour to confront the world. This image of religion must be considered in the context of Durkheim's claim that religion has survived because it has met certain requirements. Religion creates a specific mental state inside the individual that elevates one above oneself and allows us to live a better life. Durkheim was harshly critical of theories based on science. He contended that the essential notions of science, such as time, space, number, and causation, arose from one's religious journey. "Philosophy and sciences were born," wrote Durkheim. Religion, it is because religion originated by displacing science and philosophy." In truth, time, place, and numbers convey the "rhythm of collective activity" towards the divine. The primitives' communal behaviours towards the holy resulted in the categories of time, space, number, and class, through which we interpret the world. If that's the case, these are communal representations. At the cognitive level, these originate from a communal reaction to the sacred.

- Social functions

According to Durkheim, communal representation is the outcome of "an enormous cooperation." They develop when the entire community joins together to perform particular ceremonies in response to the divine. There are two sorts of rituals: positive and negative. Negative rituals involve a slew of restrictions that must be followed in order to re-establish the communal mood and worship the sacred. Positive rituals, on the other hand, reflect the meticulous 'preparations' that the person must go through before approaching the holy and participating in the community. For example, an individual's initiation ceremonies at the age of maturity imply a "total transformation" of the young person. Some of the initiation rites include difficult, yet it is through pain that one 'transforms' and the profane becomes holy. Let us now try to decipher what this word 'sacred' signifies. 'Sacred' refers to anything

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<sup>6</sup> Functions- dysfunctions of religion, AchieverIASAcademy, last visited on May 13, 2023, <https://www.achieveriasclasses.com/functions-dysfunctions-of-religion-key-points-to-remember/>

noble, honoured, venerated, and worshipped. Who is the source of this 'sacredness'? It is civilization that develops "sacredness" and distinguishes the "sacred" from the "profane." In other words, gods are created by ceremonies done by humans. Furthermore, what is considered 'sacred' now may not be so tomorrow. It is also true that when the 'profane' approaches the holy without proper protections, the 'sacred' loses its worth. According to the preceding, the 'sacred' is the formation of society. If this is true, then when society worships the holy, it is essentially adoring itself.

Isn't that right? Collective feelings are aroused when a society gets together and performs particular rituals collectively. These collective feelings are represented by the sacred item, which is set apart and revered by society.

The collection of norms and regulations, or ritual features, lead and turn society into a moral community.

## **<sup>7</sup>A Critique of Durkheim's Understanding of Religion**

Durkheim contended that religion is created by society. Durkheim could not agree with professors who believed that religion arose from what people perceived to be genuine. However, Durkheim's thought has signs of evolutionism. Durkheim's involvement with religious functions does not imply that he was a "functionalist." Durkheim's functionalism was straightforward and broad in scope. Functionalism was first articulated systematically after the 1920s. Malinowski, Radcliffe-Brown, and Talcott Parson deserve credit for this.

Evans-Pritchard (1981) presents some criticisms of Durkheim's religious premise.

- i) The sacred-profane distinction does not apply universally.
- ii) The sacred and profane are not necessarily diametrically opposed.
- iii) The sacred-profane dichotomy does not appear to exist, particularly among Sri Lankans and Melanesians.

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<sup>7</sup> Karl Thompson, Functionalism, Revisesociology, Jul 13, 2018, <https://revisesociology.com/2018/07/13/functionalist-perspective-religion-revision-notes/#:~:text=of%20contradictory%20events,-,Criticisms%20of%20the%20Functionalist%20Perspective%20on%20Religion,or%20between%20religions%20for%20example.&text=Secularisation%20means%20that%20religion%20performs,functionalism%20may%20be%20less%20relevant.>

- iv) Totem is not holy to everyone in the culture; it is only sacred to a select few.
- v) Totem is not always associated with clan religion.
- vi) The clan's totem does not have to be the individual's totem.
- vii) Durkheim believed that the genesis and cause of religion are societal in nature and have nothing to do with individual impulses. When he suggested that religion develops from collective feelings evoked by community involvement in rituals, he contradicted himself. Take note of the use of feelings to explain the origins of religion.
- viii) In his theory, Durkheim failed to give individual and emotional components of religion enough weight.

Hurbert and Mauss (1892) conducted a detailed analysis of Vedic and Hebrew sacrifice in another work. Hurbert and Mauss demonstrate how the act of sacrifice enhances the mental and moral energy of society by studying the logical structure of the mechanism of animal sacrifice. The act of renunciation in sacrifice strengthens social forces, and the sacrifice gets society's united might. The social purpose of sacrifice is carried out in a way for both the individual and the society. This is another example of how inferences are derived from a specific social activity. The study does not yield any results in this case. This criticism, of course, should not prevent us from appreciating Hurbert and Mauss's masterful understanding of sacrifice.

Durkheim disregarded Van Gennep (1909), who was a contemporary of his with his coworkers. In his book *Les Rites de Passage* (The Rites of Passage), he challenged Durkheim's idea of religion and stated that everywhere across the world, the human life crises encompass a wide range of ceremonies. These ceremonies signify the self's writing with the collective and the universe. Van Gennep's contribution to sociology was to point out that every significant event in society, particularly birth, marriage, and death, was surrounded by a complex of symbols and ceremonial practices. Van Gennep's ideas on religion demonstrate that even Durkheim's detractors had plenty to add to the study of religion. The process of questioning Durkheim's theories generated new ideas.

## **Growth of Functionalist Approach**

One does not name Durkheim as a functionalist, but we do label those who were greatly affected by Durkheim's theories in one way or another. Under the umbrella of functionalism, Malinowski questioned Durkheim's ideas on religion. Malinowski, like evolutionists Tylor and Frazer, wrote about

the origins and development of religion. The difference was that they accused Durkheim of fostering the acceptance of ideas that had little validity in ethnographic evidence. We can briefly review Malinowski's opinions on religion before moving on to a brief discussion of the Radcliffe-Brown method to the study of religion. Radcliffe-Brown, unlike Malinowski, was significantly inspired by Durkheim's views. Both scholars were troubled by Durkheim's methodology in their unique ways. Their points of view are briefly explained.

Malinowski's reasoning differed slightly from Durkheim's. Again, Malinowski, like Durkheim, was fascinated with the origins and evolution of religion. He, too, was an evolutionist inasmuch as he inquired about the origins of religion. He became a functionalist after seeing and documenting the impact religion had in his life. Malinowski had previously researched the Trobriand Islanders in the Western Pacific. The inhabitants here were largely from fishing settlements and had to cope with dangerous fishing excursions on a regular basis, as well as experiences that they couldn't explain. Malinowski contended that primitive humans overcame their sentiments of dread, rage, melancholy, and so on by engaging in religious activities or performing particular rituals that helped them transcend such uncertain sensations. Religion served as a means of regaining mental stability and readjusting to conditions of emotional stress that had occurred. Religion, in other words, served as a 'tool for adoption' to every given scenario. For example, when the islanders set off on a lengthy voyage, they would conduct rituals and magic on the boat to ensure that it did not cause them any problems along the way.

This type of training was performed under a variety of mental and physical instability circumstances. Religion assisted in restoring mental stability and readjusting to the emotional stress that had transpired. Religion, in other words, serves as a 'tool for adoption' in each situation. For example, before embarking on a long journey, the islanders would perform rituals and magic on the boat to guarantee that it would not give them any issues along the way. Malinowski and his successors provided diverse responses to comparable issues posed by early evolutionists. In this sense, they viewed religion in terms of its functions; their discoveries advanced beyond and customary replies to queries about religion's origins and growth. They gave a functionalist counter-argument to evolutionist views. Radcliffe-Brown, Malinowski's successor, attempted to evaluate ethnographic material using sociological principles rather than merely witnessing and documenting facts about primitive tribes. He was drawn to Durkheim's sociology. This sort of training was carried out under a range of mental and physical stressors.

A.R. Radcliffe-Brown attempted to modernise Durkheim's theory of totemism. Religion is viewed holistically. Radcliffe-Brown (1929:295-309) shown totemism to be a specific type of racism in his work, 'The Sociological Theory of Totemism.' In human civilization, universalistic law is in effect. According to universal law, anything linked to a society's material or non-material well-being is an object of religious attitude. Those who rely on dairy products, for example, have a ritualistic approach towards dairy animals. Radcliffe-Brown rejected psychological theories for the origins of religion.

Evans-Pritchard (1965:74), on the other hand, is dismissive of this position. He emphasises that in practice, when explaining the occasions of dancing among the Andaman Islanders, Radcliffe-Brown explains religious activity primarily in terms of the dancer's personality and the mixing of sentiments and deeds in his dance that build communal cohesion. Second, Radcliffe-Brown generalises from this situation that a ceremonial mindset promotes societal cohesiveness and harmony. Evans-Pritchard (1965:74) criticises this inclination to generalise based on a single example. He tells out that dances in Central Africa, for example, can provoke violence and unhappiness.

Third, Radcliffe-Brown contends that religion serves to maintain society together and its many forms vary in line with the sorts of society. Ancestor worship, for example, is frequent in countries with lineage systems. But, as if to prove Radcliffe-Brown incorrect, Evans-Pritchard (1956:75) points out that ancestor cult is found among several African cultures where no lineage system exists. On the following grounds, Evans-Pritchard criticises Radcliffe-Brown's functionalist approach to religion.

- i) Radcliffe-Brown's sociological theories did not take into consideration any negative evidence
- ii) In nature, Radcliffe-Brown's generalised remarks are a little hazy. They have minimal scientific significance because it is impossible to confirm or deny them.

Evans-Pritchard attacked the functionalist approach to religious studies. Furthermore, he studied the possibility for demonstrating that specific religious systems are present in certain types of communities. Levy-Bruhl initiated this, while Evans-Pritchard subsequently brought new concepts to the sociological study of religion.

## Conclusion

Functionalism arose as a response to and a challenge to evolution. Early sociologists planted the seeds of functionalist theory. The definition of functionalism was then developed. Functionalism is a way of looking at social reality that involves tracing the functions, utility, or religious practises that contribute to the unity and strength of a social community. Following that, Durkheim's idea of religion was thoroughly examined. To begin with, Durkheim picked totemism because he considered it to be so closely related to social order; secondly, Durkheim believes that totemism possesses traits that are original to itself and are not stolen. When discussing the roles of religion, it was demonstrated that religion has a cognitive function that assists one in adjusting to the demands of daily life. Religion serves a variety of societal roles. It changes society into a moral community.

When society worships God (whatever God is), it is worshipping itself. To elucidate the ideas, an instance of the Arunta tribe's totemic practises was provided. We briefly addressed the concepts of Durkheim's contemporaries. Furthermore, Durkheim's interpretation of religion was questioned. It was maintained that his sacred-profane distinction is not universal, and that his religion thesis still relied on an individual-psychological explanation rather than a societal one. This criticism was followed by an overview of the further development of the functionalist approach to the study of religion. Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown's thoughts were spoken about.