Collective or Individual?

**Emilé Durkheim's and Max Weber's approaches to religion.
The comparison of their scientific visions of the social**

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Contents

Summary. The paper concerns scientific visions upon religion — and so the society, community — of two of main masters of sociology: Emile Durkheim and Max Weber. Both of them, as great thinkers and philosophers of the Enlightenment, are seen paradoxically — as its heirs as well as its transformers.

Both, as members of the first generation of sociologists, were scientists in fully sense of the word, who elaborated such core-concepts of the Enlightenment as: the power (role) of science (mainly sociology), rationalism, development and progress. They also faced problems of social change, or social complexity of modern societies in terms of individualism, integration, new sources of social order.

Since the Enlightenment ruptured with all irrationally- (magically-, intuitionally-, religiously-) oriented perspective, it seems to be intriguing to answer the question: how it was possible that in the age in which the apology of ratio, and the science were so strong, the religion — the realm irrational in its essence — was located in Durkheim's and Weber's works as the domain idea that would influence social life. How it was possible that religion could organize the society rather than disorganize it?

The paper, by presenting the main ideas of Durkheim's and Weber's work, and then throughout their individual approaches to religion, attempts to answer the question how the religion was interpreted and what role it played in society in each of mentioned conceptions?

One more intellectual (anthropological) axis of reflections put in the paper, and it was Clifford Geetrz's conception of the religion as a cultural system. However, created a century later, it seems to be accurately corresponding to presented views.

Key words: religion; the social; society; community; social change; modern society; the Enlightenment; secularization.

Introduction

The central point of the Enlightenment — the epoch that aroused in Europe in a fully form in 18th and 19th century — under no doubts, was the **power of science**. The science — as a new realm of human life and in contrary to the epoch of Middle Ages — aimed "to liberate human kind from material wants, from illusions that mired [people] in fear and ignorance". Science was imagined and strongly believed as "a vehicle of human progress" [Seidman 1989, p. 55]. The idea of **progress** therefore was mainly understood in terms of technical and scientific development as well as but also as a social and moral complexity. In result, it declared strong dismissal of any irrationality. The Enlightenment stood out against traditionally interpreted religion and what is more, "a religiosity based, hierarchical, and elite-governed society (...), struggled for a secular culture that was tolerant of diverse beliefs, values and society that expanded individual liberties, social equality, and political democracy" [Seidman 1989, p. 55].

In result, another core-value of the new epoch appeared — it was **individualism**. Since the Enlightenment ruptured with traditional interpretation of social reality that

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confirmed universal and collective-oriented explanation of the social, simultaneously released man from group-dominated shackles, giving him real freedom and putting "the individual at the heart of society" [Seidman 1989, p. 56]. Any more than it was before, a group or collective power (social class, family, tribe) influenced individual so strong.

Natural result of the trend was **differentiation**. It grew on the field of all these changes, inspired by individualism and freedom, ended up with the new modern society: heterogeneous, capitalistic, where individualism was its hallmark and "allowed individuals to fashion a life according to their personal preferences and values" [Seidman 1989, p. 55]. It was exactly what the Enlighteners envisioned: "**a freer, more open, and dynamic society**" [Seidman 1989, p. 55].

On the other hand, however, almost all Occidental countries (in which the main reflection of the paper is located) struggled with social disorder in that time — named as "revolutionary order" [Ray 1999. p. 86]. Social crisis — caused by social, political (French Revolution, American Civil War) and technical revolutions (England) which implied almost all countries, covered the whole Europe that time. Western societies glorified and longed for freedom and cultural pluralism but in the same time were trying to manage in new, extraordinarily dynamic social and political circumstances. In this context, problem of **morality**, **social order** aroused soundly and started playing important scientific, role.

In this specific ambience the works of Emile Durkheim and Max Weber were constructed and it would be strong ignorance to avoid its influence. Both of them faced similar problems, that had a great — whereas different — impact on their works. Durkheim and Weber are broadly known from their achievements in the field of methodology, although their approaches to it strongly differ; the best known opposition between them is Emile Durkheim's reification of social facts and interpretative sociology by Max Weber. But apart from that, both of them are also famous for religion-oriented, although opposite, conceptions of the social which are the matter of the paper.

1. Among general similarities between Durkheim's and Weber's scientific perspectives

Emile Durkheim and Max Weber are two from the greatest thinkers and philosophers of the Enlightenment, masters of sociology.

It is rather rarely that they are compared together, especially, throughout their intellectual similarities[1]. Therefore, before the differences between them will be finally presented, let us concentrate on the plane of Durkheim's and Weber's similarities. With regard to the limits of the paper's volume, let me only enumerate what S. Seidman has precisely described in his work [Seidman 1989]:

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[1] Usually Durkheim is said to be the hair of Spencer or Comte tradition, whereas Weber is often compared with Marx's works. See the bibliography included in the paper.

- both were professional scientists (sociologists) in terms of being "the first generation of social thinkers [who] assumed chairs of sociology and wrote as sociologists". Let us only mention that: Emile Durkheim established the first European Chair of Sociology in Bordeaux, then he taught at Sorbonne and Max Weber taught at the Universities of Berlin, Fribourg, Vienna.

- both of them "understood sociology as a specialized discipline rather than as a general theory of humanity" [Seidman 1989, p. 57] — both were concentrated on developing a new discipline and were seeking for appropriate tools for solving real social problems;

- it was resulted in the fact that both were pioneers in sociological scientific research: both wrote research-oriented studies — Emile Durkheim *Suicide* was the first study in which quantitative data was used as a relevant support for sociological (descriptive, qualitative) explanations, as well as in Max Weber *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism.* Therefore, their works sound even today and have been having a great impact on generations of sociologists and "are still considered models of scientific sociology by many sociologists" [Seidman 1989, p. 57];

- although Emile Durkheim and Max Weber were "convinced that social modernization promoted a liberal political society" [Seidman 1989, p. 71], both were against English-styled liberalism explained in terms of greed, competitiveness, egoism, blind pursuit for welfare and economical success with the money as an autotelic core value [Seidman 1989, p. 73]. Emile Durkheim promoted social solidarity as the base of human relations, and in the works of Max Weber, egoism, competitiveness and welfare were "soften" as goals of religiously oriented human activity;

- both in their scientific works drew to religion as a social phenomenon, as a system deeply immersed in the social context, that is why both of them showed it "secularized" facet; both referred to the same confessions: Protestantism and Catholicism, however did in different manner, therefore the conclusions driven from their interpretations strongly differ;

- Durkheim's and Weber's religious-oriented scientific perspectives should be seen as natural and understandable but modified, responses on the modernity. Their reflections were evolved from a specific social and historical context (as from a kind of specific matrix) that was consisted of such categories like: the self, social order, social change, cohesion, moral development — as those seem to be the central ones. Emile Durkheim and Max Weber put them as the key words of their great narrations of the Enlightenment.

Precise conclusion of Durkheim's and Weber's approaches gave S. Seidman, saying that they both "fully absorbed the concept of the social character of humanity. Against the conventional wisdom of their time, Durkheim and Weber insist on the social formation of the self and his or her embeddedness in institutions and webs of cultural meaning" [Seidman 1989, p. 85]. Differences lay in its interpretations: in Emile Durkheim approach, "the individual [is] embedded in social institutions and emphasizes the importance of shared cultural beliefs and values as a condition of freedom and social unity", whereas Max Weber reflections also emphasized the cultural construction of the self ("cultural formation of individualistic") but this specific spirit was Protestantism as a "cultural phenomena" [Weber 1930/1992, p. 13] that engendered a specific economics system [Seidman 1989, p. 86].

In this light, the main problem of the paper: the social function of religion in Durkheim's and Weber's works — took appropriate perspective.

2. Religious "rethinking of individual"[2] — Emile Durkheim approach

Emile Durkheim is known as a functionalist, who imaged society as a one organically-joined system in which the social played the most important role. He was the author of the broadly known statement describing the nature of society as a reality *sui generis*. By this expression he proved that every single element of the social, every social fact is real and by its nature (genuineness), must be driven from society itself. In such a collectively-oriented work [Alexander 1989, p. 123; Ray 1999, p. 90], religion in his view played a crucial role; but, what is interesting, can be perceived throughout an individualistic perspective.

The starting point of Emile Durkheim's analysis was the problem of **segmentation of social structure** that he observed by phenomena of **social morphology** (intrinsic condition of complexity of social relations, distances of social ties etc.). Facing the essence of modern societies: strongly inter-differentiated and freed, Durkheim observed that the individual who gained the independency, was released from any obligations. In result, he might have lost the sense of social kins and — in the darkest scenario of anomic, unprincipled context — prone to suicidal disposition [Seidman 1989, p. 65]. In such a counter-factual context, when "moderns make the individual sacred [and] individualism [become] pubic religion" [Seidman 1989, p. 61], dangerous lack of social integration can be easily observed [Ray 1999, p. 101][3].

Inspired by traditional (primitive, integrated) communities, in opposition to which modernity was displayed as its antithesis [Seidman 1989, p. 60], Emile Durkheim

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[2] See: Seidman 1989, p. 64.

[3] Although, as Ray depicts, "the *decline* of religion in modern societies does not indicate social pathology, rather its generality confirms that is normal process" [Ray 1999, p. 92].

brought up the problem of **coherence**, which, in his opinion, lied in social morphology. The coherence was represented and could be "fulfilled" by **social solidarity**. According to Durkheim's response to, what makes (primitive) societies socially coherent (unified) as a whole, was the solidarity with its "**religiously based common culture**" [Seidman 1989, p. 59]. "Common", in this context, means **the same values and social attitude towards them shared by everybody** — that can be described in other words as a "symbolic representation" of an "unitary collective consciousness" [Ray 1999, p. 97, 107].

Thereby the remedy on modernistic irregularities and social incoherence, was the religion itself, understood as the "**religion of humanity**" — and perceived as its inevitable fact. According to Seidman's accurate commentary, "Durkheim argued that, when intense group feelings are attached to an idea or object, and these feelings are articulated in shared beliefs and social practices, we are witnessing what is in the essence of religion" [Seidman 1989, p. 64]. So the religion was not the set of relatively stable symbols or continual habits but rather perceived as the mechanism (process) that leads people to unite in one community, one organism. "Despite the secularity of modernity, as evidence in the separation of the church and state and in the decline of Judeo-Christian dogma, it evolves its own **religion of humanity**" [Seidman 1989, p. 64].

In this light, Emile Durkheim is seen to have interpreted **religion** that was **deeply secularized**: as a plane of social ideas, patterns of human activity, creating fertile field for morality and social integration, broadly known as an "organic/mechanical solidarity". The climax of Durkheim's analysis upon religion was the declaration that the society itself was the god — the heart of morality [Durkheim 1990, p. 38]: 'hyperspirituality' [Lukes 1975, p. 234].

The matter of function of religion in Emile Durkheim works is a phenomenon *par excellence* social [Szacki 1964]. Religion — with the kinship in its core [Ray 1999, p. 97] should be therefore assumed as a **mechanism which integrates all social relations** [Krasnodębski 1999; Tarkowska 1990]. But also can be interpreted as a kind of a total system — as the source as well as the source of control[4] of every single action of human activity:

> "Religion is a system interconnected beliefs and religious practices related to sacred matters what means — specific and forbidden, beliefs and practices that unify all believers into moral community called as a church" [Durkheim 1990, p. 41].

Emile Durkheim idea was precisely reflected in Jeffrey Alexander commentary, who declared that social "order could be stable only if it were external in ontological sense" [Alexander 1989, p. 127], what was precisely explained in example of totem [Durkheim

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[4] Foucault, Michel (1975). *Discipline and Punish: the Birth of the Prison*, New York: Random House.

1990; Ray 1999, p. 106–107] and also in the statement that "collective order would be accepted because it held to be sacred" [Alexander 1989, p. 136–137].

As we can see, Emile Durkheim approach to religion was deeply originated from the social. It was both — its result and also its driving force that could integrate the whole community, guarantee its coherence and stability, and certainly confirm it. What is remarkable for Emile Durkheim conception is the fact that religion is an 'invisible' but inevitable idea, a mechanism, a process that contributes social order.

3. Max Weber's approach — religion as a cultural pattern

Max Weber essence of religion differs from Emile Durkheim conception because seemed to be adequately reflected in the definition created by Clifford Geertz. Geertz describes religion as "A synopsis of cosmic order, a set of religious beliefs, (...) a gloss upon the mundane world of social relationships and psychological events. It render them graspable" [Geertz 1973, p. 124]. Geertz adds also that religious beliefs "(...) do not merely interpret social and psychological processes in cosmic terms — in which case they would be philosophical, not religious — but they shape them" [Geertz 1973, p. 124]. It seems that all that Max Weber investigated on the field of social development in relation to religion, was assumed in these words.

Max Weber is known as a one of the masters of sociology, who became famous for his reflection on Protestantism and its impacts on development of modern capitalism. But Weber analyzed also other religious systems, such as: Confucianism, Taoism, Islam, Catholicism, Judaism [Weber 1984] however, his approach to each of them was the same — as to **the system of common beliefs that influences human action, impacts on men's life-style, generates specific attitudes towards life, and human kind — to the whole mundane world**. Max Weber proves that each of the religious system generates its own set of meanings, axioms, norms of human behavior that shape human life and attitude towards it. But only Protestantism, and Calvinism as its core, could create capitalism in Occidental 'manner' within western modern societies[5]. Protestant spirit denied English-styled liberalism (with its core values such as: naturally based competitiveness, hard work, greed [Seidman 1989, p. 73] and 'consisted' of such puritan's attitudes — assumed in the theology of predestination as the God's calling — like: selfdiscipline, restraint, value of work (hard-work), conspicuous consumption, prosperous business or career achievements; all those were clear examples of saved soul.

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[5] It is needed to be add, that Weber did not deny that capitalism could had been developed in other parts of world and so other religious systems could had influenced it, but implemented Protestant ethic was major factor of creating capitalism in modern sense. See: Krasnodębski, Z. 1999.

All above suggests that Max Weber's understanding of religion has deeply cultural meaning. But not only. Religion can be also interpreted as **the main source of change** that brings visible, rational consequences. According to example of Protestantism — its ethic resulted in the blossom of specific economically-oriented social activism — capitalism.

In the light of "**elective affinity**" [Ray 1999, p. 174][6] we can see, that religion was not only the set of symbols that brings specific meaning, creates the rituals consisted as the source of change influencing human development, the but religion was also interpreted as the mechanism creating rational patterns of human activity, specially on economical field. In this point, Weber's religiously-oriented perspective finds connection with his methodological work — in the **social action**. The social action, opposite to simple, impulsive and naturally-based human behavior, is deeply rational: is based on rational motives, and is always socially- (humanly-) oriented[7]. In result, in his view, the purpose of sociology — value-related and value-relative science [Ray 1999, p. 167] — was explicitly warded in the concept of *verstehen*[8].

The concept of *understanding* then, in social science is also a crucial element for disputes on religion in Weber's works, when we do realize that protestant (puritan) ethics brought about **rationality** which then became a central attribute of modernity. Rationalism — inevitable step in developing process of modern societies, caused it transformation into bureaucracy — an ideal state of society — and was called by Max Weber as an "**iron cage**". This term then was interpreted into two dimensions: as a state of mind and the shape of human activity. Rationalism in future perspective, resulted in "the disenchantment" of the world and was understood as "a loss of meaning in modern societies with the decline of integrated worldviews that in the past had been provided by religious and philosophical systems" [Ray 1999, p. 164]. But simultaneously, rationalism was the category and mechanism that brought back human religious activity. It was Protestantism indeed in which context its basic values became driving forces of capitalism — genuinely rational thinking.

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[6] "Elective Affinity" is a term taken from chemistry that means mutual affection of at least two phenomena influencing one each other in unpredictable way [Ray 1989, p. 174]. As an example, usually is presented "alleged affinity between Calvinism and capitalism that while decisive for human development was the accidental confluence of two quite different processes — the emergence of commercialism and the Reformation" [Ray 1989, p. 174].

[7] Weber interprets 'social action' as "behaviuor to which subjective meaning is attached. It takes account of others and is thereby oriented in its course. Action is social when directed to the behaviour of others meaningfully (Weber [1913] 1987:4)" [Ray 1999, p. 168]. The aim of sociology as the science was to understand (*verstehen*) and interpret social actions.

[8] Weber divided social actions into 4 types: (1) traditional action, (2) affective (or emotional) action, (3) value-oriented action, (4) goal-related action (Weber 2002), but anyway, "we can understand (*verstehen*) human social action by penetrating to the subjective meanings that actors attach to their own behavior and to the behavior of others" [Ray 1999, p. 167].

In this context, let us capture one more conclusion that can be, unexpectedly, revealed from Max Weber work. Since we agree with L. J. Ray who makes Weber's approach to Protestantism more precise, in words that:

> "In order to understand the thesis in the context of Weber's work one should see it as only one part of his account of the development of capitalism, which was complex and multidimensional (...)",

and adds that:

> "His account of the origin of *capitalism* referred to a complex interaction of social, economic and cultural factors, while the Protestant Ethic essays had the more limited objective of explaining the origin, not of capitalism *per se*, but the spirit of rational accumulation" [Ray 1999, p. 175],

should not we assume that religious values — presented in Weber's works — can drive into the self-dismissal? The response should be negative and opposite. "Rationalization", Ray explains, is "originated in the decline of magic and taboo, which give way to the norms according to which certain actions were constructed as religious abomination" [Ray 1999, p. 186]. But abomination of religious activity that confirmed magical inconceivable order.

4. Conclusions

As a conclusion upon Max Weber and Emile Durkheim approaches to religion, let us quote Clifford Geertz words one more time: "(...) religion tunes human actions to an envisaged cosmic order and projects images of cosmic order onto the plane of human experiences" [Geertz 1973, p. 90].

Geertz's words seemed as if have been taken straightly from traditional (primitive, pre-industrial) communities, but it is nothing than misunderstanding. In both cases presented above: in Emile Durkheim conception of the sacred in secularized approach to religion as the very prior source of any realm of human activity that was 'embodied' in society, as well as in Max Weber interpretation of religion as a source of meanings and social attitudes towards life resulted in religiously oriented, rational activity of individual, religion — deeply immersed in the realm of morality and social consciousness — reflects a kind of a cosmic order which is transferred into the plane of human experiences. The matter is, in what way the 'cosmic' is interpreted. Emile Durkheim's work suggests rather external approach [Ray 1999, p. 93] in which 'cosmos' is evolved from 'the social', the society itself, and parallely to the religion — is immersed in the social. Therefore in result, accordingly to Durkheim conception, we can interpret that the cosmos is social *sui generis*. In Emile Durkheim conception, society itself makes its own order that guarantees its integration, that is why the society becomes religious

objectivity in a way that is observed through the individuals, and is again directed back towards them. Whereas Max Weber orientation presents scientific concentration on religion in more traditional, 'concrete' and 'substantial' way — throughout Protestantism that it is seen as a configuration of specific values (God's callings) displayed in its historical reality — as a confession that was immersed in a specific historical environment. It is also given by supernatural force — the God but it is a role of a man whose responsibility is to maintain it, and also the right to use it according to his subjective purposes, changing the world at the same time.

In this light, Durkheim's and Weber's interpretations of (the role) of religion remind scientific paths leading into two different directions: top-down and bottom-up. Emile Durkheim conception seems to reflect the top-down pattern in which religion is given to the individual as a mechanism, an idea that guarantees him coherence with community, harmony, brings 'cosmos', and paradoxically — release him to the freedom. At the same time, the role of the individual is rather limited: he is expected to understand the order and implement its rules to everyday life. Weber's conception presents it in opposition — the role of religion in society can be described by the bottom-up path. In this vision, religion is a set of symbols and demands related to a man; it is also given him (from the God — an external force) but his role in the process is much more active than in Durkheim's view. Religion, in result — let us repeat it — according to Weber, is not the mechanism that confirms sacred cosmos (Durkheim's approach) but reflects in front of the human kind a broad plane for rational thinking and what is more, for wide range modification.

In this light, both, Durkheim's and Weber's approaches to religion — as a collective or individual manifestation of values — deeply differ, but seem to mirror Geertz's conception of religion as a cultural pattern that finally buckles their ideas and allows to think of their visions as of complemented and continual conceptions.

The cultural concept of religion is defined by Clifford Geertz as: "(...) denotation] of a historically transmitted pattern of meaning embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life" [Geertz 1973, p. 91]. Novelty and usefulness of Geertz's idea is that he develops his conception explaining that religion 'consists' of cultural patterns that emerge from it as — called by Clifford Geertz — 'models'. According to him, "(...) cultural patterns are "models", that they are sets of symbols whose relations to one another "model" relations among entities, processes or what-have-you in physical, organic, social, or psychological systems by "paralleling", "imitating", or "simulating" them". And then Clifford Geertz explains it in his next words that — in the context of Durkheim's and Weber's thoughts — seem to be essential: "**The term "model" has, however, two senses — an "of" sense and a "for" sense** — and though these are but two aspects of the same basis concept (...)" [Geertz 1973, p. 93]. Indeed, Durkheim's scientific approach to the religion as the main source and prior realm of any social activity suggests interpreting it as 'a model *of*' — gaining an ideal (integrated, collaborated) societal rules emerged in the solidarity phe-

nomenon. Whereas Weber's ethic of Protestantism — confession (religion) — that also imposes on a men a set of duties (God's calling) can be interpreted differently — as 'a model *for*' social change. Those two approaches of two greatest masters of sociology Emile Durkheim and Max Weber, although remarkably differ, seem meet and complete each other as two aspects (models) of Clifford Geertz's vision: "(...) cultural patterns have an intrinsic double aspect: they give meaning, that is, objective conceptual form, so social and psychological reality both by shaping themselves to it [what can suggests rather Durkheim's conception] and by shaping it to themselves [that might relate to Weber's vision]" [Geertz 1973, p. 93].

The response to the title's question of the paper, weather Durkheim's or Weber's approaches to religion in society is rather collective or individual process, seems that both of them include those two aspects of the social in their visions. The difference matters in the proportion of it in each project. Both of them — Emile Durkheim and Max Weber create their goals in stable and coherent relation between the individual and community, in which the religion plays crucial role, although propose diversed paths to reach it.

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Apart from those analytical, hypothetically posed presumptions, let me finish the paper with long, but exceedingly accurate S. Seidman's quotation summarizing Emile Durkheim and Max Weber works:

"Their grand narratives of human history invariably began and ended in the West; scripted men as the primary actors; wrapped themselves in the mythic aura of science, marked out good and bad, evil and redemption, without ever owning their stories as moral tales. Today, we can appreciate that their faith in science, reason, individualism, progress, and the West were entangled in the making of modern (...), but also in producing powerful moral and political visions filled with social hope for better world" [Seidman 1989, p. 88–89].

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