

Sociology of Religion

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

In this tutorial, you will look at sociology and religion, and see how they fit together. Within the broad diversity of the world's religions, there are many different ways of approaching the material of religion, such as the customs, the beliefs, the questions, and maybe even the doubts that sometimes accompany religious faith. Sociology is a social science that looks at human societies, their institutions, and group and individual behavior. It looks at many things related to the history and the current state of human development. Because religion has been such an integral part of human societies for such a long time, sociology naturally has an interest in social phenomena. Specifically, this lesson will cover:

[1. Emile Durkheim](#)

[2. The Goal of Sociology of Religion](#)

1. Emile Durkheim

Like the other social sciences, sociology and the **sociology of religion** only became a formal academic discipline in the 19th century. This was principally through the work of French sociologist Emile Durkheim.

What launched this discipline was Durkheim's sociological investigation into suicide rates among Catholics and Protestants. Published in 1897, it was the first study of its kind that applied **quantitative** and **qualitative** research methods and analysis to specific behaviors concerning religion and religious affiliation. Sociology in general, and Durkheim's pioneering work in the sociology of religion in particular, was unique in that it attempted to present an objective study of specific behavior, such as suicide rates among different religious groups.

Some of the quantitative tools he applied were age, socioeconomic factors such as class, role in society, and comparative rates of suicide between men and women. Qualitative factors that he was interested in included things such as education level; geographic location, which might also have quantitative elements; and wartime versus peacetime suicide rates.



TERMS TO KNOW

Sociology of Religion

An academic discipline that applies the quantitative and qualitative tools of social science to the study of religion.

Quantitative

Referring to quantity or number.

Qualitative

Referring to the qualities, or characteristics, of people, places, or things.

2. The Goal of Sociology of Religion

This kind of study is different from disciplines such as the philosophy of religion because it isn't concerned with the presuppositions and the possible truth or falsity of religious belief. It looks at the structure and the phenomena of religion and religious practice to see how it might interact with the larger picture of society and culture.

The sociologist of religion generally isn't occupied with the philosophical and theological predicaments that a philosopher of religion might spend time on. He or she isn't going to dig for answers or analyses of difficult existential and religious questions.

He or she wants to understand the myriad ways that such religious intentionality impacts individuals and societies. They want to understand how the structure of belief and practice that religion presents can be understood objectively without having to submit to the constraints of any particular religious tradition.



SUMMARY

Sociology of religion really began in the 19th century with the pioneering work of French sociologist **Emile Durkheim**. He was interested in studying suicide rates among different religious groups, and he applied both qualitative and quantitative research methods to do that. These are the distinguishing marks of sociology of religion. It's set apart from the philosophy of religion in the sense that philosophy of religion might be more concerned about questions of religion and the truth and falsity of certain religious beliefs. **The goal of sociology of religion** is, rather, to look from the outside objectively at the phenomena of religion and how it relates to the individual and society.

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